



Mobile Bodies: Migration, Performance and Social Belonging in Malian Dance

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Title:

Mobile Bodies: Migration, Performance, and Social Belonging in Malian Dance

A dissertation presented

by

Sharon Freda Kivenko

to

The Harvard University Department of Anthropology

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

Social Anthropology

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Sharon Freda Kivenko

2016

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Abstract

Mobile Bodies is a dance ethnography about the interface of arts performance, sociality and labor migration. Based on intensive apprenticeship in Mande Dance undertaken in Bamako, Mali this dissertation considers the creative ways in which professional and aspiring Malian dancers garner social recognition as they perform in local, national, and transnational arenas. How do bodies in motion - while dancing and migrating internationally - serve as strategic sites for re-negotiating social capital at home?

Elaborating on Sheller's "embodied theory of citizenship" (2012), this dissertation brings to light the work of Malian performance artists as they negotiate and articulate their social belonging through their dancing, music-making and acting. Trained by the State but (thanks to neoliberal reforms) left to their own devices to make work, find patrons, and make a living, Malian artists creatively and strategically shift the focus of their skills from nation-building to self-making. What sorts of possibilities for social belonging emerge as artists dance off of national stages and onto transnational ones? Can the work of Malian migrant dancers offer insights into modes of social belonging that are largely performatively (rather than discursively) constituted? Moreover, as a project methodologically focused on distilling ethnographic insights from rigorous dance training, this work brings

together academic analyses of the sociality of dancing with on-the-ground lessons about the mechanics and aesthetics of performance. As a result, this project highlights the incisive ways in which scholarly practice is informed by performance practice.

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Writing is often perceived and described as a solitary undertaking however, the fact of the matter is that a writer's inspiration comes from the various interpersonal encounters she has. Writerly inspiration is social at its core and, as was certainly the case for me, the deep, sometimes weighty, feeling of solitude and sheer isolation while writing was often buttressed by the people from whom and with whom I was learning to be an anthropologist, and of course, about whom I was writing.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Apprenti (Fr/Bk): apprentice

Badenya (Bk): A Mande conception of comportment that suggests that children of the same mother are bound together by obligations of collaboration and mutual support. Exists in dialectical tension with *fadenya*.

Ce (Bk): (pronounced “cheh”) man

Donsen (Bk): dance step

Dundun (Bk): A large cylindrical drum with skins on both ends, often comes in three different sizes, played with sticks.

Fadenya (Bk): A Mande conception of comportment that suggests that children of the same father must keenly compete for recognition and social power from the *pater-familias*. Exists in dialectical tension with *badenya*.

Fasa (Bk): family line, family heritage

Fasiya (Bk): patrilineage

Fasobaara (Bk): A postcolonial, post independence concept of mobilizing Malian citizens to direct their efforts toward building their independent nation-state.

Hòròn/ hòrònnya (Bk): noble class/ nobility

Jamu: patronym

Jatigi (Bk): patron

Jembe (Bk): Mande hourglass shaped hand drum.

Jembefola (Bk): *jembe* player

Jeli/jeliw (Bk): Mande caste of oral historians or singers often referred to as bards or griots. The *w* connotes the plural.

Jeliya (Bk): The work and fundamental characteristic (-ness) of the *jeli*.

Jon/jonw (Bk): A historical Mande caste of enslaved people taken as war captives or in repayment of debts.

Kora (Bk): A twenty-one stringed Mande lute, typically played by Mande *jeliw*.

Mògòya (Bk): Mande personhood

Mouso/musow (Bk): woman/women

N’goni (Bk): A small Mande lute with three to eight strings. There are versions played by *jeliw* and versions played by hunters (*donsow*) as well as vernacular versions played for fun by Malian youth (*kamalen*).

Nyama (Bk): vital force or life force

Nyamankala (Bk): A system of inherited artisan trades which generally include: *jeli* (griot), *numu* (blacksmith), *garanké* (leatherworker), and *funé* (reciter of Islamic texts or Islamic praise-poets). It is often referred to as a Mande caste system.

Siya (Bk): ethnicity

Tògò (Bk): first name, sometimes also defined as reputation

Toubab (Bk): foreigner

Wolosow/wolosow: The historical descendants of *jonw* born into a status of captivity and servitude. Sometimes defined to as “house-born” (*wolo* – born and *so* – house) servants.

Note on Orthography

Throughout this text, I use the Bamanakan (Bk) variant of the Maninkakan dialect spoken in Mali and Guinea in West Africa. For language materials I have drawn from Bird and Kendall (1980), Bird, Kendall and Tera (1995), Charry (2000), and from Bailleuil (2005). I give quotations in the dialect and phraseology in which they were spoken. Although I try to remain consistent as to the spelling of the Bamanakan words I use in the text, there are surely variations in the spelling of a word or phrase that have passed under my editorial radar. These variations reflect the fact that although Bamanakan has a formal established orthography, its use by native Bamanakan speakers both in writing and in speech is often limited and infused with mostly French transliterations – what I can only surmise as legacies of French influence on the Malian educational system (and thus on Malian literacy).

I am nevertheless dedicated to being as linguistically precise as I can be. I believe that this effort is necessary to honoring local language over colonial linguistic holdovers. I therefore include Bamanakan (Bk) terms wherever I can, knowing full well that in so doing, I am taking the risk of slowing the pace or flow of the text with constant parenthetical interjections. I have included a Glossary of Terms immediately preceding this page, offering it as a language guide to clarify Bamanakan terms that I reference repeatedly in the academic text.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile Bodies **Self-Making through Malian Dance**

Waiting for our plane at the JFK airport, I step into my role as dance company ethnographer. Joining Brown University's New Works/World Traditions performance ensemble on their research and dance training tour to Mali, I am drawn in to a cultural tour group of talented college student performers ready to put a place to the names of the Mande music and dances that are the foundation of their repertoire. Boarding our plane to Bamako, one New Works/World Traditions member reflects excitedly on what she is about to experience: "It's like getting on a plane to meet a rock star you've always wanted to get to know!"

Anthropomorphizing Mali as a "rock star" casts the nation-state as an emblem of charismatic creativity and as an alluring embodiment of the expressive cultures that exist within its borders. Perceiving a place as a glamorously personified synecdoche of its people and their cultural productions makes that place and all who and that it represents more enthralling, more approachable, and more exciting to engage. For cultural tourists, this type of romanticized imagining softens the hard lines distinguishing Self from Other, offering tourists a view or, as Urry (1990) suggests, a "gaze" - into geographies and lifeways otherwise too unfamiliar to approach (Hughes-Freeland 2012; van Beek and Schmidt 2012; Neveu Kringelbach 2012; Neveu Kringelbach 2012; Hall and Tucker 2004). But, as this dissertation will ultimately show, it is not simply foreign tourists or foreign patrons who cast Mali as

a luminary (among several) of post-colonial West African dance, music and theatre (see Castaldi 2006; Schauert 2014), it is also the resourceful accumulation and mobilization of cultural, social, network, and economic capital by professional Malian dancers, musicians and actors that bring the Malian nation and its performance arts into transnational performance markets and onto transnational stages.

Although the political economy of tourism remains an underlying theme of this project, its main focus veers away from the kinds of cultural imaginings and value exchanges that tourism engenders (see van Beek and Schmidt 2012; Neveu Kringelbach 2012; Skinner and Theodossopoulos 2011; Hughes-Freeland 2012; Bruner 2005; Hall and Tucker 2004; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998; Urry 1990). Instead it focuses on the social, economic, and artistic strategies that Malian dancers and musicians develop in response to dance tourists who come to Mali to intensively study, practice and perform Malian dance. For reasons that I will soon address, the 1990s was an era in which dance tourism to West Africa became somewhat of a growing trend. With its focus on active danced participation in dance-events (c.f. Cowan 1990) as opposed to the more passive dance observation expected of tourists on more general cultural tours (van Beek and Schmidt 2012:5), Westerners on dance tours to West Africa could experience *in their bodies* the dances that many of them have watched, studied, and in some cases performed at home. Dance workshops taught by local Malian performers and accompanied by local musicians, community celebrations including weddings and baptisms, as well

as nights out at live music clubs are all on the itinerary and each requires tourists to let their dance trump their “gaze”.¹ The dance tourists, whom I have over the years encountered in West Africa, travel with the explicit intention of actually dancing themselves. For many European and American dancers of “African dance,” their knowledge of African expressive cultures is largely based on what they learn in urban dance studios in North America and Europe, and on what they see on proscenium stages or on the thousands of “African dance” video clips circulating the Internet. To feel dances in their bodies in social environments where the dances are widely familiar and practiced; to encounter variations, large and small, of the choreographies that have become codified in the US or in Europe; and to hear a more robust musical accompaniment than are typically offered outside of Africa, are important, if not essential, components of dance tourism. The West African artists who can deliver these components stand to benefit tremendously both economically and socially. Their “embodied encounters” through dance tourism (Sheller 2012:214) and the lives that they have built as a result of these encounters are at the heart of this project.

¹ Here I am drawing from Urry’s (1990) theorizing of the “tourist gaze” and how it is “socially organized and systematized” while also emerging as a response or in contrast to the non-tourist social practices that might be happening in a place visited by a tourist (2-3). Although Urry builds his framework of the gaze around Foucault’s theorizing of the “medical gaze,” he spends little time critically thinking through the questions Foucault actually raises with regards to how the gaze is a tool of surveillance and thus tied to power, domination and imposed self-regulation (Foucault 1979; 1976). I therefore refer to the “gaze” here in a broader way than Urry does, so as to recognize the power dynamics inherent in touristic encounters, and to make note of how these dynamics are marked by colonial history in West Africa and by the legacy of colonial conceptions of race, racial difference and gender (see Sheller 2012).

Thinking through the transnational encounters that dance tourism engenders offers a useful means by which to theorize the kinds of artistic self-making that my informants work to achieve and that therefore drives the inquiry of this thesis. Another more central component of this thesis, however, is the kinesthetic practice and performance of Malian dance itself, which I explore by tracing processes of “forming” professional dancers, by delineating the aesthetic parameters of professionalized Malian dance, and by analyzing the establishment and strategic use of ethnically and historically representative repertoires. A third and final component that focuses my analysis of Malian artistic self-making is the work of historically situating transnational encounters, performance professionalization, and the efficaciousness of performance within the Malian state’s political-economic transition from mid-twentieth century post-colonial independence to its varied efforts to participate in today’s neoliberal world order.

Cultural production in the era of economic “reform” is an enduring undercurrent of this project. As will be made clear, in the early 1990s, as developing nations were following World Bank and IMF strategies to grow their economies by attracting foreign capital investments to privatized industries, cultural production quickly went from being a nationalist political project to an individualist economic one. This being the case, artists’ strategies for staying engaged in the arts caused them to seek out and thus to largely rely upon the support and interest of foreign patrons, brokers and consumers. These efforts have proven successful for a select few. In many ways, this echoes the larger economic outcome of industrial privatization and

structural adjustment. Rather than paving the way for effective inclusion and participation in the world economy, neoliberal economic reforms have benefitted individuals and corporations in ways that are lumpy and exclusionary as opposed to smoothly “flowing” and inclusive. As James Ferguson argues, neoliberalism has manifested “highly selective and spatially encapsulated forms of global connection combined with widespread disconnection and exclusion” (Ferguson 2006:14). The artists at the heart of this project are working to push back against this exclusion. And so, in efforts to achieve “membership” (Ferguson 2006: 161) in the global economy, and to, quite frankly, survive, joining the growing waves of transnational labor migration northward from the southern hemisphere has come to be the most viable option. What is unique about the Malian artists who migrate to Europe, to the US and to Japan for work is that they for the most part work overseas in the industry for which they have skills and training. In other words, theirs is a skilled labor migration, as opposed to a labor migration in search of compensatory work of nearly any kind. Indeed, the migrant Malian artists whose stories motivate this project, are migrant artists who work in the arts.

In the pages that follow, I will focus on Malian dancers and musicians implicated in the transnational “World music and dance” performance industry that has grown out of global economic reforms of the 1990s and the Malian state’s and Malian citizen’s efforts to join the world economy. Whether it be via engagements with dance tourism to Mali or via migration to the US or Europe to work in urban “African dance” communities, the artists at the heart of this project offer

illuminating testaments to the kinds of mobilities that can, in fact, manifest even as they wrangle with the disconnections and exclusions of globalization. In the face of the major economic setbacks and failures that have grown out of the neoliberal reforms of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the Malian artists at the heart of this project have capitalized on their kinesthetic mobility (i.e., their dance and music-making skills) to overcome the economic and social subjection of globalization (Ferguson 2006:21). Indeed, by resourcefully honing and marketing their performance skills, they garnered transnational mobility through the connections that helped them to work in Mali with foreigners or to migrate abroad for work which, in turn, manifested a means of renegotiating social belonging and recognition at home. This project, therefore, focuses on an entangled triad of mobility - kinesthetic, transnational and social - that is highly dependent upon the physical, that is bodily, capacities of the mobile individual. And it comes together in what I call *Mobile Bodies*.

Recognizing how ethnographic text has the inevitable effect of condensing human life ways (ideally) into evocative words on a page, I make every effort to ensure that bodies, for all their capacities to stir emotions, to invoke cognitive and social associations, and to serve agential interests, remain at the forefront of my analysis. Here, I echo dance historian Susan Foster's suggestion that scholars "approach the body as articulate matter" as a means of recognizing "the central role that physicality plays in constructing both individual agency and sociality" (2003:395). My discussion throughout this project therefore, emerges from the body, for the

mobilities about which I speak are fundamentally bodily: without the body there is no kinesis; without the body there is no capacity for movement across national borders; and of course, as Bourdieu (1977) has shown us, social belonging cannot be performed without *habitus*, which fundamentally manifests in the body.

Mobile Bodies is not simply about social phenomena by and of the body, it is also about social phenomena that are *embodied*. Which is to say that it focuses on social manifestations made possible and perceptible through the body, or what Geurts describes as “made body” (2002:232). While Geurts, following Bourdieu, suggests that implicit bodily knowledge like Ewe conceptions of *seselame* or, kinesthesia,² and its association with dignity are “embedded in cultural and socialization processes” (2002:232), in the pages that follow, I attempt to show how knowing *through* and *in* the body is not always or only instilled in implicit ways but that it can also be inculcated in *explicitly and overtly physical* ways. Indeed, as I show in my chapters on performance training and on Mande performance aesthetics, aspiring dancers’ bodies are “formed” in rehearsals and in dance circles (Bk: *kenemaw*) not only with a view toward making performers of Mande arts but also with a view toward making body (em-bodying) Mande personhood. With formed bodies and in the course of performance, Mande artists articulate and re-negotiate their social status, the most successful of them, finding transnational patrons and markets to further bolster their sense of self and social belonging at home.

² Sensory-based knowledge and awareness of the position and movement of parts of the body.

Mobile Bodies, therefore, is an account of bodily modes of social formation that also offers a theoretical framework for thinking about the physical and active ways in which individuals navigate and grapple with their social worlds. Looking at dance and music performance as a space in which mobile bodies operates, I attempt to shed light on the ways in which arts performance can be socially efficacious (c.f. Srinivasan 2012; Askew 2002; Foster 1996; Cowan 1990). And by efficacious, I do not necessarily mean productive or even beneficial, but rather that an efficacious performance is socially generative; it is what Austin (1975) and Butler (2006) call “performative”. But before I go any further into the theoretical framework of this project, let me first “set the stage,” so to speak, and lay out some of the political, economic, and historical factors at play in bringing *Mobile Bodies* to the fore.

Setting the Stage: The Political Economy of Malian Dance

Post-colonial independence movements of the mid-twentieth century recognized and capitalized on the political, social and economic value of local expressive cultures. All over the African continent, music, dance and theatre were harnessed as nation-building tools that would serve to articulate what it meant to be a citizen of a unified and autonomous African nation-state.³ National performance ensembles

³ Gregory Mann speaks to the ways in which West African independence movements of the mid 20th century asserted their “autonomy from France in three key sectors....: diplomacy, defense, and monetary policy” (2015:6). However, reading Mann’s history of the growing influence and presence of non-governmental actors in the Sahel (what he calls “nongovernmentality”) alongside specific histories of West African independence movements, what becomes clear is how Mann overlooks the fact that there were articulated efforts towards asserting West African *cultural* autonomy from France, as well (Castaldi 2006). Indeed, Senghor’s writings on *Négritude* remind us of the ways in which African and African diasporic leadership used and drew from Africanist aesthetics, performance practices, and expressive cultures in their efforts to imagine and mobilize communities and nations autonomous from colonial impositions (1964). Guinean Fodeba Keita’s founding of the

were established as the labor that would hone and wield those nation-building tools. In 1962, two years after Malian independence, the newly established Malian government, like its neighbors, established national arts performance ensembles. The national “ballet” (*Les Ballets Maliens*), the national instrumental ensemble (*L'Ensemble Instrumental du Mali*), the national popular music band (*L'Orchestre National du Mali*), and the national theatre ensemble (*Le Kotéba National du Mali*) were given mandates similar to that of a “national museum”: to collect, preserve and (re)present Malian cultural heritage (*patrimoine*) through the arts.⁴ With repertoires that were amalgamations of expressive cultures from the disparate ethnicities encompassed within the newly established national borders, these ensembles were “performing the nation” (Askew 2002); imagining and presenting through the arts the independent state with Malian citizens and foreign states as their audiences (Charry 2000; Castaldi 2006).

The Malian national ballet, like national ballets all over the world, amalgamated local dances, songs, stories, and costumes with a view to offering an essentialist and unified portrait of the nation-state (Shay 2002). Local vernacular and ceremonial

first “African ballet,” *Les Ballets Africains*, was done in the spirit of asserting African cultural autonomy from French colonial impositions. See, for instance, Senghor's *Liberté I* reflection on *Les Ballets Africains* (1964:287–291).

⁴ Personal communication, Boubacar Diabaté, *Les ballets Maliens*, Bamako, Mali, June 2, 2009. Throughout this project, I will use the French “patrimoine” interchangeably with “heritage” and “patrimony” in order to stay true to the language of my interlocutors and to the sentiment and cultural orientations of the term. Namely, that cultural heritage in Mali is understood as an explicitly patrilineal inheritance. As I address in Chapters 2 and 3, the work of Malian performance artists is closely tied-in to efforts and obligations to honor the patrilineage from whence one’s cultural heritage is thought to come.

music, dance and theatre traditions were reconfigured for the proscenium stage: they were abstracted, remixed, speeded up, shortened, and athleticized (Apter 2005; Morelli 2007).⁵ In Africa, although national ballet companies were inspired by European balletic styles of staging and composition, their repertoires and aesthetics were distinctively African and hailed as emblems of African historical memory, continuity, and as just noted, autonomy from Europe. Castaldi reminds us of the significance of Francophone African leaders choosing “ballet” to identify the work of indigenous African dance troupes: “The concept of African Ballet juxtaposes the western classical dance tradition to African dance, which for most Europeans evokes the tribal and the primitive. The term ‘African Ballet’ stands as a challenge to European racist assumptions, suggesting that African dances are classical forms that offer their own aesthetic, equal in sophistication and beauty to the ballet tradition” (Castaldi 2006:9). Moreover, even though African national ballets were established as representatives of young nation-states, the message they ultimately worked to convey in their repertoires was that the African nations and cultures that they represented were, in fact, quite old. Nationally sponsored dance productions in Mali, Senegal, Guinea, Conte D’ivoire, Ghana and so on, were therefore a means of reconciling ideas of pre-colonial tradition with visions of a modern, internationally recognized, self-determined, *African* nation-state.⁶

⁵ The term “vernacular dance” refers to dance that is familiar both to viewers (who might also be dancers) who can identify the name, origin and social context of the dance and to dancers (who might also be viewers) who know how to perform foundational steps, rhythms and/or songs of that dance. I use “vernacular” interchangeably with the term “popular” as a means of highlighting how Mande dance is widely known and practiced.

In the early years after independence, the Malian government, inspired by President, Modibo Keïta's belief that "cultural exchange is the oxygen of a people," established annual *Semaines nationales de la jeunesse* (National Week of the Youth or, Youth League Celebrations). Drawing together youth from all over the nation to participate in sports and arts competitions and presentations, these celebrations were a means of instilling in Malian youth a sense of nationalism, citizenship and civic belonging. Samake (2008) speaks to the fact that these festivals were a space where Malians could "revalorize and develop" their culture, while serving to circulate and strengthen socialist political views espoused by the independence era government. Rewards were given to notable expressions of cultural familiarity and nationalist pride in song, theatre, or in regionally and culturally specific dances. These events were such a success that they survived the 1968 coup d'état that replaced Modibo Keïta with a socialist one-party police state under Moussa Traoré. Indeed, Traoré was known for his appreciation for the arts and his keen recognition of its socio-political value. And so, under Traoré, *Les semaines de la jeunesse* were

⁶ The decolonization project of imagining and articulating a national history and heritage through performance of course raises questions about who is doing the imagining and articulating. Whose visions are being enacted and who is being excluded in the process? In the Malian case, although representations of northern Malian peoples (Tuareg and Songhai most especially) were included in national performance repertoires, they were originally choreographed and performed by Malian southerners of Mande descent. Moreover, by bringing Tuareg representations into Malian dance and music repertoires, Tuareg agitation for self-determination in the Sahara since Malian independence in 1960, was glossed over and ignored which further fueled conflict and secessionist desires. In fact, the 2012 Tuareg rebellion that drove the Malian army to retreat and that fuelled the most recent coup d'état, resulted in a unilateral declaration of independence of the Tuareg state of Azawad by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA). Interestingly, in a somewhat confusing twist, ever since the establishment of the state of Azawad, Tuareg music has grown in recognition on the international stage as *Malian* music, not as *Azawadi* music.

reconfigured into a biennial festival of arts and sports called *La biennale artistique, culturelle et sportive*.⁷

From independence in 1960 until the transition to multi-party democracy in 1991, the arts were used throughout Mali to inculcate school aged children with nationalist sensibilities. Performance education was a part of school curricula and youth were encouraged by community leaders to join township (*commune*) performance ensembles. The *Biennales* of the 1970s and 1980s motivated township ensembles to innovate on local vernacular performance materials, preparing them for the stage. Township ensembles would bring their materials to regional competitions, and winning choreographies, ballets, and songs would be integrated into the repertoires of larger regional or district ensembles. The most skilled performers of the smaller ensembles would join the regional or district ensembles as they prepared their materials for the national competition at the *Biennales*, which would take place in different regional capitals each year. According to my informants, the *Biennales* of the 1970s and 1980s were energetic gatherings of Malian youth – a time of exchange and play, a time for nation-building (Bk: *fasobaara*), of national unity and mutual understanding.⁸ It was in the context of

⁷ For more on the Malian *Biennales*, see Arnoldi 2006.

⁸ One migrant artist interlocutor, who honed his skills as a dancer and musician in the era of the *Biennales*, fondly remembers the weeks leading up to the competitions. In one conversation he described how youth from all over the nation would board together (what they refer to as *internat*). They would rehearse, share ideas with other troupes, and also engage in civic projects of all kinds, like tree planting, road clearing, cooking for festival participants, or preparing the festival grounds. As my informant describes it, beyond the actual performances themselves, the *Biennales* were in the 1970s and 1980s, a time of cultural rapprochement and a time in which youth were taught civic

these competitions that young performers determined whether the arts could offer them a viable career path. Indeed, over my years of working with Malian artists, I have been regaled with stories of people whose talents were “discovered” at the *Biennale*. Young people who won awards or recognition at the *Biennales* were invited to join *Les Ballets Maliens*, or its “junior/feeder” ensemble, *La Troupe Artistique et Culturel du District de Bamako* (or, *La Troupe du District*).

La Troupe du District played an important role in the career trajectories of the migrant Malian artists on whom this project focuses. (It was also, as will soon be made clear, an important site of research for this project.) There are two reasons why this is the case. The first has to do with the entrenchment of *Les Ballets Maliens* members in their roles as civil servants; and the second has to do with the ways in which neoliberal economic reforms of the 1990s resulted in a cut in government sponsorship of the arts. By the 1980s, members of the *Les Ballets Maliens* firmly settled-in to their roles as cultural ambassadors and as civil servants (*fonctionnaires*) for they enjoyed the fact that membership in the national performance ensembles brought with it not only the responsibility of (re)presenting the nation, but also the physical comfort, economic benefit, and social security of being a part of the Malian civil service. Without incentives for retirement and without much else in the way of career opportunities beyond a career in the national ballet, members did what they could to stay on the roster for decades.

Today’s *Ballets Maliens* is an aging version of its 1980s incarnation: members are in

mindedness and the importance of joining in the efforts of *fasobaara*, or building the homeland (Seydou Coulibaly, July 14, 2011).

their 50ies, repertoire is a calcified rendering of choreographies set in the 1960s and 1970s, and rehearsals are poorly attended, if they happen at all. This lack of turn over at *Les Ballets Maliens* has, since the 1980s, opened up few spaces for new talent. *La Troupe du District de Bamako* thus became a place that compensated for and arguably benefitted creatively from the stagnation at the national ballet, and became one of Mali's premier training grounds and central talent pools for young dancers, singers and musicians. Internationally known artists Oumou Sangaré, Habib Koité, Nahawa Doumbia, and Fatumata Diabaté among many others are said to have spent formative years at the *Troupe du District* performing alongside many of the lesser known, but equally hard working, dancers and drummers at the heart of this project.

Not only did the *Troupe du District* serve as a productive training and performance space in the face of the calcification and entrenchment of the national ballet, it also filled the void in nationally representative cultural production brought-on by major governmental and economic reforms of the late twentieth century. In 1990, the World Bank and IMF added to their studies of developing nations and their economies an inquiry into Malian state affairs. What they found was a civil service that accounted for two-thirds of the Malian government's revenue budgets (World Bank 1990:24) and thus recommended streamlining the government and privatizing government held industries. It wasn't until the after the 1991 coup d'état and the establishment of a democratic government, however, that these recommendations were pursued.

In 1990, on the eve of the first *Biennale Artistique et Culturelle* of the decade, Moussa Traoré's socialist government was overthrown by a military junta that in 1992 handed over power to a civilian, democratically elected government under the leadership of Alpha Oumar Konaré. Although Konaré served in the late 1970ies under Traoré as the head of historic patrimony and ethnography at the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture (the ministry in charge of the *Biennales*), and although he was an academic intellectual with a reputation for a strong interest in the arts, he took seriously the structural adjustment policies proposed by the World Bank and mandated a cut in state budgets for arts production. The national performance ensembles remained intact, however the *Biennales*, among many other government sponsored public arts events, were canceled for lack of funding.

As the Malian economy privatized, local options for creating viable careers in the arts significantly diminished and so artists who were not affiliated with the national performance ensembles began to set their sights on foreign arts markets and patrons. The *Troupe du District de Bamako* came to be a space where aspiring artists could, in community, hone their dance, music and acting skills and where they could showcase their performance aptitudes for talent scouts who made the rounds to local performance ensembles looking for talent for films, television, and music and for dance tourists in search of teachers and creative collaborators. Interestingly, the *Troupe du District de Bamako* is officially a part of the Bamako city bureaucracy, but since the economic reforms of the 1990s, it has received little in the way of financial support from the city. Aside from securing a rehearsal and storage space at the

Bamako city hall, the Troupe was and continues to be a volunteer ensemble that shares among members whatever meager earnings it does generate. Private performance engagements for foreign cultural or business tour groups, invitations to “animate” (*animer*) celebrants at wedding festivities, and a smattering of governmental events such as airport greetings of foreign dignitaries (*acceuil*) (see Fig. 1),⁹ or at state-sponsored outreach events are among the various paying gigs that the Troupe has, none of which offers a sustainable income for any of its members.



**Figure 1: *Acceuil* - La Troupe du District de Bamako at the Bamako Airport
Bamako, Mali. June 23, 2009.
Photo by the author.**

⁹ “Animate” comes from the French *animation* which means, enlivenment or entertainment. It is used in West Africa to refer to the work of encouraging spectator-participants to join in a celebration, and to the emotional liveliness or excitement that performers foster among spectators (see also White 2008:54). In Mande performance, there is the notion that if a dance or song is particularly moving to an individual, or if in one way or another it invokes or is related to that individual’s patrilineage (*fasa*), it moves life force (*nyama*) in a way that is thought to inspire the individual to act in a way that is honorable or faithful to that heritage.

In 2001, in his final year as president, Alpha Oumar Konaré re-established the *Biennale Artistique et Culturelle*. The political machinations as to how and why are murky as Ministry of Culture records from the time of Konaré's installment in 1992 through to today remain classified. Nevertheless, the artists who in the 1990s remained in Mali as well as those who migrated abroad for work were equally delighted and reinvigorated by the reinstatement of the *Biennale*. In fact, several artists living abroad returned home in 2001 to participate in *Biennale* festivities and some even performed in the competitions. Interestingly, the *Troupe du District* brought to the *Ballet a Thème* competition a staging of the ballet that they set for the 1990 *Biennale* but that never made it to the stage thanks to the coup d'état. The 1990 ballet restaged for the 2001 *Biennale* is called *Faburé* and is based on an age-old Mande folktale about corruption and the abuse of power. As the story goes, the advisor to the head of a village stole a lion's pelt that was gifted to the village head by a revered hunter. Wearing the pelt, he hid in the bush and waited until villagers passed by to jump out and terrorize and rob them. The advisor was eventually caught and the village head was implicated in the ruse. On several occasions, I was told of how the 1990 *Biennale* was canceled on the eve of its opening because undercover secret police saw *Faburé's* not-so-hidden political commentary on Traoré's leadership and government and (alongside the teacher and student strikes and demonstrations going on at the time) considered it further indication that Malian citizens were agitating for political change. A decade later, the ballet's central message calling for accountability on the part of the Malian government remained

relevant in the eyes of *La Troupe du District* artists and so was finally taken to the stage at the 2001 *Biennale*.

Although the Malian *Biennales* carry-on to this day, arts production in Mali continues to rely almost entirely on private investment. And so even as Malian youth continue to participate in the kinds of cultural production and creative exchanges that the *Biennales* aim to foster, the post-colonial nation-building ethos that undergirded the *Biennales* of the 1970s and 1980s is in many ways trumped by individualistic desires to harness the arts as tools of self-making that, for all intents and purposes, focus on transnational performance arts markets and foreign patrons.¹⁰

The Cast: Self-Making Artists in a Transnational Landscape of Performance

You musn't simply take your diploma and wait for the State to offer you jobs. Those days are over. You can live from your work. I do. I have traveled abroad. Others like me

¹⁰ Hibou's (2004) nuancing of the distinctions between public and private with respect to the state and governance becomes important here. In speaking of privatization and private investment, it is important to recognize, as Hibou suggests, that "privatisation [sic.] is in no way synonymous with the retreat of the state or even the primacy of private over public" (15). In the case of Malian cultural production, even as the Malian state responded to World Bank and IMF suggestions to liberalize its economy, the fact that (as we will see) foreign governments (including France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the EU among others) have actively contributed to arts production in Mali raises questions as to the kinds of access to more lucrative areas of investment support for the arts might bring along with it. Not to mention the kinds of benefits that Malian ruling elite might enjoy by working with foreign patrons in this way. The nature of privatization as it relates to Malian cultural production would be a fruitful area for further research. Moreover, although privatization directly impacts the artists at the heart of this project, its inner workings lie beyond the scope of this dissertation. For more on the strategic relinquishing of state control and governance, see Mann (2015).

*have done so, too. We have all returned to Mali. It is not for nothing that we have done so.*¹¹

Choreographer, cultural historian, and former director of *Les Ballets Maliens*, Kardigué Laïco Traoré spoke in a booming though encouraging tone to an auditorium filled with arts students. We had come to the *Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers Multimédia Balla Fasseké Kouyaté* to interview Traoré,¹² only to find him preparing his opening remarks for a colloquium on European Union investment in the arts and in cultural production in Mali. Alongside renowned visual artist and director of the *Musée Nationale du Mali*, Abdoulaye Konaté, and EU Ambassador to

¹¹ Kardigué Laïco Traoré speech at the *Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers Multimédia Balla Fasseké Kouyaté*, Bamako, Mali, October 21, 2009.

¹² The *Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers Multimédia Balla Fasseké Kouyaté* is one of the two formal arts education institutions in Mali. The large, verdant campus of Sahelian-inspired buildings is nestled into the scrubby hillside atop which the presidential palace sits, keeping watch over the Malian capital. Established in 2005 by the Malian Ministry of Culture in partnership with the European Union and several other European cultural development organizations, the *Conservatoire* is dedicated to “artistic and professional training for creators in the plastic arts, dance, design, multimedia, music, theatre and engineering in cultural production” (*assure la formation artistique et professionnelle de créateurs dans le domaine des arts plastiques, de la danse, du design, des métiers multimedia, de la musique, du théâtre, et de l’ingénierie en actions culturelles*) (www.conservatoire-arts-mali.org. Accessed April 24, 2015). Students are well educated with cosmopolitan tastes that inspire their interest in the largely Afro-contemporary and “global art” aesthetic of arts faculty and their course offerings. The second arts school in Mali is the *Institut National des Arts du Mali* (INA). It was established in 1933 as an artisan-training space called *La Maison des Artisans Soundanais*. It later became the *École Artisanale de Bamako* and in 1963 was nationalized as *INA*. Students are basically literate, coming from working class Bamako families. Faculty members are Mande crafts people and performers of popular arts. The campus is a grimy walled-in compound situated in the heart of Bamako’s bustling central market. It’s main entrance is steps away from the entrance to the *Artisanale* marketplace where “traditional” and tourist arts and crafts are honed and sold: wood workers carving decorative masks, sculptures, and drums sit alongside metal workers heating and hammering away at rough-hewn iron bells; jewelers fashioning intricate necklaces and earrings ignore the constant movement of leathersmiths as they lay out their died hides to dry. Passing through the crowded artisanal market, *INA* students attend classes in “vernacular” performance and plastic arts. The contrast between the *Conservatoire* and *INA* is hard to miss: the geographical location, architecture, student body, and of course the pedagogical content point to a classed landscape of cultural production where the largely transitionally funded cosmopolitan arts are taught and produced above the bustle and grime of the city and where nationally-sponsored “traditional” and vernacular arts are produced smack dab in the heart of Mali’s dense urban capital.

Mali, Giacomo Durazzo, Kardigué Laïco Traoré drove home the point that Malian artistic production has gone from being largely a national (and nationalistic) undertaking to becoming an importantly transnational (market-driven and individualistic) one. Describing the trajectory of cultural production sponsorship as a type of progression going from national to transnational admittedly glosses over the complicating nuances of transnational interests in nationalistic African performance in the independence era as well as the nationalistic influences and interests in this neoliberal era (and many nuances in between). Indeed, in the independence era, West African performance ensembles and performers not only found international audiences interested in performances of a post-colonially re-established timeless “Africa” (Ebron 2002) but also served north American Black Power and Afrocentrism movements of the mid-twentieth century (DeFrantz 2002), and played a role in the conceptualization and formulation of an “African diaspora” (Gilroy 1993). Furthermore, although the Malian artists who manage to make a respectable living in the arts today rely in large measure on foreign patronage and on their own transnational mobility, they all, in one way or another, have spent time learning and honing their trade in nationally sponsored and oriented ensembles like the *Troupe du District de Bamako* or at the *Biennales*. That said, as I intend to make clear, it remains useful to appreciate how the general trend in cultural production has, in fact, moved over time from nationally sponsored efforts to transnationally sponsored ones. The trend was implicit in Kardigué Laïco Traoré’s intervention and was evident in the stories that my artist informants shared. It has thus served as the

central phenomenon orienting the *Mobile Bodies* formulation that this project proposes.

A close reading of Traoré's comments reveals several key themes in the trajectory of growing a career in Malian arts production that also draws *Mobile Bodies* into bold relief. The first key theme is the professionalization of Malian arts performance. The Malian independence government's use of the arts in its nation-building project established a class of professional artists that barely existed before independence. With the founding of the national performance ensembles in the 1960s, West Africa's famed caste of oral historians and hereditary musicians called *jeliw* (griots or bards) were no longer the only performers given the mandate of representing Mande peoples through the staging of local expressive cultures. As the national performance ensembles of Mali grew their casts, their repertoires, and their audiences (both in Mali and abroad), the work of (re)presenting the nation in dance, music, song, and theatre became the means by which "artist" as a professional status emerged as a social class that cut across caste, family heritage, and growing socio-economic distinctions (see Askew 2002; Schauert 2014). The dancers and musicians whose experiences inform this project learned their skills (what in French they referred to as *formation* and what in Chapter 1, I theorize as "forming the body") in light of the newly established notion that to dance and make music was to perform a civic duty that also carried the potential of making a viable and for some, a lucrative, career in the arts.

A second theme that Traoré's intervention raises that is important to the lives and work of professional Malian artists and to the formulation of *Mobile Bodies* as a theoretical concept, emerges from his insistence that the days are over in which the State will come along and offer artists a job. Privatizing the arts whether it be through the sponsorships of foreign governments, foreign cultural associations and non-governmental organizations, through foreign educational institutions, or through the support of individual patrons (both Malian and foreign) with personal interests in the arts, created a dynamic in which artists must be ready to engage with transnational performance arts markets and ideally find opportunities to work abroad. Artists supported by foreign patrons and invited to work outside Mali gain a transnational mobility that is in many ways thanks to the performance skills (their kinesthetic mobility) that they fostered through their training (their bodily formation). Which brings us to the third theme that Traoré raised in his speech: migration for work.

Although Traoré as an artist is, like the majority of my artist interlocutors, a product of artistic citizen-formation of the independence era, he, *unlike* the majority of my artist interlocutors, managed to establish a career as an artist and arts educator in Mali that also enabled him to move relatively fluidly from local arts markets to transnational arts markets and back again. Using his own arguably rare experience as an example, Traoré spoke to what he and the foreign partners of the *Conservatoire* (represented at the colloquium by the EU ambassador to Mali) considered the ideal way to make a career as an artist: to train in Mali, to find

inspiration in Mali, to travel abroad to collaborate and to represent Mali in their work, and to return to Mali to continue innovating and creating. Traoré offered his remarks on the heels of EU Ambassador Durazzo's suggestion that the EU had a significant budgetary allocation for the "development of the cultural sector" in Mali with a view toward "strengthening national identity, developing an economic sector that would draw tourists as consumers of Malian arts and that would draw Malian arts into international arts markets, and that would ultimately broaden economic development and national confidence that would breed peaceful national growth."¹³ Traoré's above quoted comments were offered to lend legitimacy to the diplomatic discourse that Ambassador Durazzo offered however, as the student questions in the Q&A segment of the colloquium suggested, and as the experience of my artist interlocutors attests, if Malian artists today really want to make a viable career in the arts, transnational support for local work is not enough, labor migration is the key and has therefore become the most desirable option.

Even though Traoré was speaking against the current of artistic labor migration he touched upon yet another important theme in the formulation of *Mobile Bodies* and in the conceptualization of transnational labor migration, the theme of *return*. As I address in my chapter on the role of migration in contemporary Mande conceptions of self-realization and self-knowing (Bk: *yeredon*), it is not enough to leave home to make a name for oneself. Migrants must return home in order to perform Mande selfhood. Return is not simply about being physically present, either, it is also (and

¹³ Giacomo Durazzo, EU Ambassador to Mali, at the *Conservatoire des Arts et Métiers Multimédia Balla Fasseké Kouyaté*, Bamako, Mali, October 21, 2009.

perhaps most importantly) about building a material *presence* through remittances, gifts, building homes, and integrating home and family into one's transnational social network (what Urry (2007) calls "network capital"). Traoré's claim that "it is not for nothing" that he and others like him have traveled abroad and returned to Mali drives home the point therefore, that to leave is to abandon domestic responsibilities and filial duties; return is essential to garnering social recognition and social belonging at home.

The Production: Performing Citizenship and Social Belonging

As noted above, the artists at the heart of this project were formed through the arts as Malian citizens and as performance artists at a time when vernacular dance, music-making and theatre were harnessed as nation-building tools and elevated as nationalistic representations of an African state that survived the ravages of colonization. These artists physically and socially matured within the nexus of post-colonial assertions of independence, the formulation of a nationally representative performance repertoire, the articulation of post-colonial Malian citizenship, and the emergence of a professional class of artists that stands outside of and, as I argue in Chapter 3, on the performative power of performance, strategically circumvents Mande caste distinctions.

In the 1960s-1980s, the formulation, imparting, and performance of national dance, music and theatre repertoires interpellated Malian youth, aspiring artists, and Malian audiences into Malian political elites' visions of Malian citizenship. The

democratization of the state and the economic restructuring in the 1990s, for all intents and purposes, abandoned statist interests in the performance arts leaving artists to re-configure their styles of performance, their audiences, and the trajectories that they imagined for their careers. In this way, Malian artists went from being artist-citizens (frequently in the capacity of *fonctionnaires* or, civil servants) who performed an elite state-sponsored vision of citizenship, to being “cultural citizens” (Ong et al. 1996; c.f. Rosaldo 2003) who, through their dance, music, and theatre worked to grapple with their relatively new position of social, economic and political exclusion by dancing and drumming a social belonging that does not hinge on state recognition or compensation. This shift takes an interesting twist when looking at the repertoire that “civil servant-come-cultural citizens” perform. Indeed, although in the 1990s the government dramatically diminished its underwriting of Malian performance repertoires and the artists who perform them, nationally representative dances remained (and still to this day remain) an important part of dance repertoires performed by dancers and musicians from Mali. Kuipers (2003) points to a similar shift in the role of performance in citizen formation in Indonesia. Among residents of the Weyewa highlands of the Eastern Indonesian island of Sumba, ritualized public discourse in the form of the *yawao* yodeling cheer once served as a voice of authority, defining the collective unity of a group and communicating leadership visions. Today, according to Kuipers, “verbal performance is far less central to authority... it is used to express accord with, or ambivalence toward, authority. Ritual speech is no longer the voice of authority but of responses to authority” (Kuipers 2003:164). Although today’s Malian dancers do

not tend to speak directly to issues of governance, governmental policies, and citizens rights through their work, the fact that they now seek out foreign patrons to sustain their careers performing national dance repertoires is, like the Weyewa ritual cheer, no longer an overt tool of the state but rather a response to or a grappling with what many Malian artists describe as abandonment by the state. The cultural citizenship that my artist informants perform thus resonates more closely with Ong's conceptualization of cultural citizenship in which citizenship is not simply an empowerment project of disadvantaged and disaffected subjects but that it is the outcome of a dialectic between how the state views its artist citizen subjects and how those artist citizen subjects use nationalist tools to work around or against their exclusion by the state (Ong et al. 1996:738).

Sitting in Siriman Sissoko's office at the *Direction Nationale de l'Action Culturelle du Mali*, the branch of the Malian Ministry of Culture responsible for overseeing and sponsoring arts and culture events and sites (including the national performance ensembles, the national museum, and the *Biennale* festival), we discussed the changing role of the government in Malian arts production as well as the changing status and career trajectories of Malian artists today. As a *jeli* raised by revered *jelimuso* singer Dédé Kouyaté, Sissoko grew up surrounded by Kassonké ritual music as performed in the villages and towns of the Keyes region of south western Mali. He came to Bamako in the 1980s when he was invited to join the *Ensemble Instrumental du Mali* and has served at the Ministry of Culture in one capacity or another ever since. Even though we sat comfortably in his air-conditioned

government office, Sissoko did not hesitate in voicing his critique of the government for its treatment of artist civil servants. Eating the orange we brought him, he held up the peel and said: “this orange peel and we civil servants are the same” and he tossed the peel across the room into a trash bin. Although Siriman remained on the government payroll, and although his family was living comfortably in government housing offered in the early 2000s to artist civil servants by Malian president Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT), he still felt disrespected and disappointed in how “les artistes” were treated by the state.

Sissoko (who died tragically during the writing of this thesis) was somewhat of a “throwback” case in that his *jeli* training influenced his vernacular music playing and that he remained an artist civil servant. Nevertheless, he has several children who are professional musicians whose careers and audiences span continents and so he understood the post-socialist post-economic reform mentality: “Back in the day, people performed for the love of their country. But today people perform to earn a living”.¹⁴

I bring Siriman Sissoko into the conversation here (and will bring him back on several occasions throughout this dissertation) in an effort to highlight the perceptual shift among Malian artists who were at one time cultural insiders but who today feel like cultural outsiders. The shift is a subtle one, for the artists formed by the state who today use statist repertoires to build transnational careers and

¹⁴ Siriman Sissoko Interview 1/21/2010.

audience bases, are not of an ethnic or linguistic heritage that is distinct from the political elites imagining and articulating a vision of 21st century Malian citizenship. Indeed, unlike the cultural citizens of Rosaldo's (2003) model who live on the cultural margins of a society, my informants are ethnically and culturally similar to those in the Malian halls of power. They speak Mande languages and have filial alliances and genealogies that are thought to be entwined with those in power. The exclusion of my Malian artist interlocutors ostensibly runs along class lines and the cultural citizenship that they perform is one geared toward generating social recognition and, by extension, social mobility for the professional and economic success that they have had in making a name for themselves as kinesthetically and transnationally mobile artists.

Mimi Sheller's "citizenship from below" (2012) is useful in refining this discussion of how kinesthetic, social and transnational mobilities inform the ways in which Malian artists perform and constitute their social belonging. As a form of improvised grappling with power in an effort to articulate a sense of social participation, social relevance and social recognition, citizenship from below is, as Sheller suggests, an embodied undertaking. Sheller's reading of archival documents, photographic collections, historical popular discourse, arboreal geographies, and travel writing focuses on the racial, ethnic, gendered and sexual claims and performances that subaltern communities make in an effort "to institute specifically embodied masculinities and femininities that are always in tension with state efforts to control and discipline sexuality, fertility, and labor relations" (2012:26–27). In so doing, she

offers an “embodied theory of citizenship” (26), that insists that bodies are not simply canvasses onto which those in positions of power project their visions of aberration or depravity that must be controlled but that bodies - specifically dynamic bodies - also have the capacity to constitute realities that call dominant imaginaries into question. How, then, does an embodied theory of citizenship bring to light contemporary Malian dancers’ and musicians’ articulations of their own social belonging through their work? How do Malian artists, trained by the state but (thanks to neoliberal reforms) left to their own devices to make work, find patrons, and make a living, creatively and strategically shift the focus of their skills from nation-building to self-making? What sorts of possibilities for social belonging emerge as artists dance off of national stages and onto transnational ones? Can the work of Malian migrant dancers offer insights into modes of social belonging that are largely performatively (rather than discursively) constituted?

By enacting citizenship from below, the artists who inform this project aim to live or have succeeded at living transnational lives. Whether by working with foreign tourists in Mali (a market which has diminished significantly since the coup d’etat in 2012) or by traveling overseas to work as artists, my interlocutors’ sights are divided between home and abroad. Foreign interest and foreign currency allow artists to engender and enhance their social recognition at home, most especially if those artists garner foreign patronage and currency while working abroad. The kinds of social belonging that transnationally migrating artists engender invokes Glick Schiller’s conceptualization of “transborder citizenship” which she describes

as allowing “transmigrants” to “build on their [transnational] social connections to form multiple systems of values, laws, and familial practices, and to generate concepts and ways of relating to other people and to the state that differ from those operative in any one of the states to which they are linked” (Schiller 2013:198). This certainly is the case for the migrant artists informing this project. Their social connections to home, their social presence in the midst or in spite of their physical absence, and the social positions that their connections and presence engender are directly influenced by that which is accomplished or engaged abroad. However, while Glick Schiller takes her discussion of transborder citizenship into an analysis of how transborder citizens have the potential to play important roles in reshaping the workings of multiple systems of law and governance, my analysis veers away from such questions because my artist informants often dwell on the social, economic, and political fringes of the worlds where they live and work. As noted above, and as will be made clear in several of the following chapters, Malian performers of “traditional” or “folkloric” dance and music are today commonly presumed poorly educated (*illettrés*), ill bred (*malélvées*), impolite (*impolis*), drunkards (*soulards*) to whom no one wants to marry their children, and who one only approaches when one needs help animating or entertaining a crowd at a celebration. And even when they overcome their social outsider-ness in Mali by making connections to foreigners or (ideally) by traveling abroad, they find themselves on the peripheries of foreign legal, civic, and social worlds. As migrants arriving with little to no sense of local language, let alone local logistical systems (currency, banking, housing, transportation), along with the fact that racist and

classist presumptions are immediately imputed onto them as black Africans, they spend much of their time abroad navigating, strategizing around, and grappling with the vast array of imaginaries placed upon them.

The Analysis: Performative Performance

By focusing this work on dancers' dancing bodies my intention is to make two main theoretical interventions. The first, as discussed above, is the formulation of mobile bodies as an analytical framework for considering the many ways in which individual bodies are implicated in strategic articulations of self and social belonging. The second intervention, is a recalibrated consideration of arts performance such that it is more readily recognized for the ways in which in addition to being a source of entertainment, or an evocation of beauty, spirit, memory, or emotion, it is also an enactment that is socially constitutive. In other words, by looking at the role of dance in the lives of Malian migrant dancers, I have found that dance is not simply an embodied undertaking that offers amusement, distraction, or a source of income, but that it is also an active constitution of sociality and personhood. To see dance in this way, therefore, is to recognize its performative capacity. I therefore offer in this dissertation, the concept of a *performative performance*.

If, in the Austinian sense, a "performative" characterizes the efficaciousness of an utterance (i.e., how saying is doing) (Austin 1975), then a *performative performance* characterizes not only that which is manifested when speaking, but also that which

is accomplished with an embodied action like dancing. John McCall observed something similar as he worked to historicize and contextualize the Ohafia *iri agha* “war dance” in Nigeria (2000). As he learned about the “interrelated complex” of music, dance, costuming, and iconic markers (55) of *iri agha*, what he found was that from the point of view of Ohafia performers and audiences, the dance is not a representation of a distant and removed Ohafia history but that it is “a collective experience that extends through time, linking the living to their predecessors through realized action” (61). While McCall addresses how performances like *iri agha* represent (i.e., making present) an order of historical knowledge that is concurrent with the present rather than pre-existent to it (2000:63), my considerations of Mande performance explores an order of social knowledge and social processes that are themselves *realizations* (i.e., making real) of social belonging.

In her analysis of the role of dance, music, and poetry in the founding of the post-colonial United Republic of Tanzania, Askew found that performance was fundamental to “active” processes of transformation by political elites and to “reactive” processes by artists and communities looking to have a say in what it meant to be a citizen of the new Republic (2002:8). Similarly can be said of Malian citizen-artists: they didn’t and, in today’s neoliberal age, don’t simply “perform the nation” as it is imagined for them by political elites. Rather, as the concept of *performative performance* articulates, Malian artists today harness performance as a tool of reactive self-fashioning.

Behind the Scenes: Genre

What do these Mande performances look like? What are they called? What genre of dance to they include? These sorts of questions, though important to this work, have proven to be among the greatest challenges to the process of writing this dance ethnography. There is an implicit politics to labeling a dance genre. Naming it isolates its history and its source, inoculating it from the possibility of viewers and critics recognizing the unexpected, often unspoken influences and amalgamations contained within it. Knowing this, I tread lightly on the “genre terrain” hoping to generate for unfamiliar readers enough of a visual and conceptual understanding of the dance, while working to honor and respect the artists whose livelihoods and whose passion for the form relies in large measure on its suppleness, adaptability, dynamism and performativity.

The dances and music that animate this project I refer to broadly as “Mande dance and music”. The term “Mande” is technically a linguistic category referring to a major Niger-Congo language branch spoken by people in a large swath of West Africa. I follow Eric Charry’s lead in his exhaustive *Mande Music* (2000), and expand the applicability of “Mande” from the verbal expressions of Mande-speaking people to include their expressive cultures (dance, music and theatre). For Mande speaking people, “Mande” also refers to a storied “homeland situated in its narrowest sense between the upper Niger River and its tributary the Sankarani in the vicinity of the Mali-Guinea border, but usually understood to include the larger stretch of the Niger

(and to the west) roughly between Kouroussa (Guinea) and Bamako (Mali)” (Charry 2000:xxi).

The interlocutors whose voices and bodies permeate this manuscript all formally identify as Malian and have strong professional connections as performers to the Malian (mostly Bamakois) landscape of performance. However, in our exchanges, almost all of my interlocutors would temper their geopolitical allegiances – their Malian-ness – with references to parents or grandparents from Guinea or Senegal, to childhoods in Burkina Faso or Côte D’Ivoire, or to formative years (training as performers or as modern day West African “troubadours”) traveling across the Mande region dancing and drumming along the way. This expansive and dynamic mode of social identification has influenced the ways in which my interlocutors speak about the dances that they do. A dance can be geopolitically identified (Malian), ethnically identified (Bamana, Khassonké, Malinké, etc...), regionally identified (Wassulu, Keyes), or identified by caste (*jeli*, blacksmith, slave, etc...) and how they are named often depends on the performance situation (the audience, the type of performance, the venue and so on). Following this dynamism, there is throughout thesis an inevitable slippage between my use of “Mande” and “Malian”. I nonetheless try to use “Mande” to refer to the general regional connections that the dances about which I speak have, and I use “Malian” to underscore their geopolitical distinctions when such distinctions are necessary.

Another challenge that the question of genre brings to the fore is less about geopolitics and more about social politics. Is Mande dance or Malian dance “vernacular”? “popular”? “social dance”? Is it “folkloric” or “traditional”? Is it “neo-traditional”? And does it stand in clear contrast (as my informants intimate) to “Afro-contemporary” dance (*la danse afro-contemporaine*)? Throughout my time in the field and certainly in the process of writing this dissertation, these questions have raised a veritable mine field of concerns as to the political, social and scholarly implications of the language that I use, even in passing, to refer to this dance.

Dance historian Anthea Kraut’s (2010) work on intellectual property and the copyrighting of social dance vocabularies speaks to some of these concerns. Her analysis of the strategies that African American dancers of the 1920s and 1930s used to protect their intellectual property interests as their social dance compositions were brought onto theatrical stages, speaks to the relative ease and frequency with which vernacular performance vocabularies can be carried across contexts (Cohen-Stratynner 2001). This phenomenon of dance vocabulary moving across contexts also points to the difficulty of consistently and precisely articulating whether a dance is vernacular, social, popular, ceremonial, folkloric, traditional or formally choreographed because some vocabularies, and this is certainly the case for the vocabularies under consideration here, move fluidly from one genre and context to another.

One more issue that the mobility of dance vocabulary across genre raises is the motivations for applying a specific genre to a specific dance. The “foundational steps” (*pas de base*) in Mande dances, for instance, are the basic steps that help performers and viewers alike to identify a dance’s name and origins. They are also steps that can be easily performed across Mande dance contexts (which I will explain in detail in just a moment). Although these foundational steps might clearly be vernacular, by which I mean widely familiar movements drawn from popular performance that is open to participation by anyone in attendance, they might also be thought of as “folkloric” when they are included in a ballet representation of pre-colonial Sahelian life performed by *Les Ballets Maliens*. Furthermore, in formal interviews and in informal discussions, my dancer interlocutors used language ranging from “*ballet*” to “*traditionnelle*” to “*folklore*” to “*création*” to identify their work and it was difficult to garner a clear sense of why they chose to categorize their work in one way or another and why they would at times vacillate across genres.

Dance ethnographer Anya Peterson Royce suggests that there is a certain futility to distinguishing between “folk dance” and “high-art dance” in the name of ethnographic study because when dance is recognized, most fundamentally, as an aspect of human behavior, the distinctions cease to carry any meaning (2002:5). This proposal would, in so many ways, make dance ethnography an easier undertaking, but it seems to me that Royce’s suggestion is fundamentally a justification for putting on blinders to the very real consequences that labeling

dance has. What, for instance, do the categories and distinctions that are laid upon genres of dance illuminate about social attitudes and associations that people (dancers, promoters and consumers alike) carry about dance practice and dance performance? What sorts of politics drive labeling a dance “folkloric”? What impressions are evoked when referring to a dance as “traditional”? What were and are the strategies at play in calling a dance ensemble a “ballet” when its repertoire is drawn from West African vernacular forms as opposed to European theatrical forms? What can be learned about and from the markets where “vernacular” performance is commoditized as compared to markets where “high-art” is on offer? And what are the social, financial, and professional implications for artists who perform “folklore” as compared to artists who perform “contemporary” dance? These questions are an implicit backdrop to this project, and although I don’t consistently acknowledge my orientations around them in the moments when I slip from one label to another, I am right now pointing to the fact that my slippages do not manifest out of intellectual sloppiness, but out of deference to and respect for the dynamic and situational ways in which my interlocutors themselves strategically self-identify and refer to the cultural grounding and genre of their own work.

That said, for the sake of clarity and in an effort to offer readers who are unfamiliar with the dance under consideration here, I have synthesized the genres of dance that I encountered in the field and on which I focus this manuscript into four main (highly enmeshed) categories of Mande dance.

The first category includes village vernacular ceremonial dances [\[Clip 1\]](#) that are performed by local people in honor of cyclical community celebrations like harvests and weddings, or for commemorative events like the founding of schools, or upon the visit of respected guests.



Clip 1: Village Vernacular Ceremonial Dance
Dialakoroba, Mali. August 2007.
Footage and photo by the author.
<http://youtu.be/5VCNRxGK1uc>

These dances are largely improvised built on a shared foundational vocabulary. They take place in the round, on village gathering grounds, and have porous boundaries separating performers from spectators. Local performance ensembles, in many instances built-in to initiatory societies, play locally derived and honed instruments that can include: wood and animal skin drums (*jembes*, *dunduns*), iron bells, stringed lutes often fashioned from calabashes (*ngonis*, or *koras*), xylophones

(*balas*), and any number of shakers or rattles. Repertoires performed in these village settings are drawn from regionally and ethnically specific “rhythm families” (a concept which I explore at great length in Chapter 2) and are repeated over several hours in any single ceremony.

The second main category of Mande dance under consideration in this text includes vernacular ceremonial dances performed in Bamako by aspiring and professional dancers hired to “animate” (i.e., to energize and mobilize) celebrants and spectators



Clip 2: Urban Vernacular Ceremonial Dance
Souleymane “Solo” Sana, Bamako, Mali. July 2009
Footage and photo by the author.
<https://youtu.be/6NfuNL25b6A>

at wedding celebrations, baby naming ceremonies (called baptisms or, *baptêmes*), celebrations honoring visitors, and at political rallies [\[Clip 2\]](#).

Like village dances, vernacular ceremonial dances are largely improvised. They also take place in the round and have porous boundaries separating performers from spectators. Unlike village dances, they take place in city streets, obstructing traffic for the duration of the celebration, or on neighborhood soccer pitches, or even in the heart of small neighborhood markets, surrounded by the bustle of commerce and permeated by the acerbic odors of ripening produce, preserved meats and fish, and poultry scat. The repertoires performed in these settings are either determined by the ethnic origins, caste, and orientations of the celebration hosts (Bk: *jatigi*),¹⁵ or by the whims and skill sets of the performers hired to animate the event. The dance vocabularies of these semi-professional and professional performers trained (mostly) in the Malian capital are reflections of the city's cosmopolitan and ethnically diverse landscape, and so the dance movements that they bring into a celebration circle can range from ethnically specific dance steps to "hybrid" choreographies that strategically and creatively draw together movements from a range of ethnic groups and regions. Accompanying instrumentation tends to include a combination of several hourglass shaped wood and goatskin *jembe* drums, one to three cylindrical wood and cow hide *dundun* drums, and some iron bells.¹⁶ Dancers and drummers invited to animate celebrations in Bamako are often artists trained in

¹⁵ For instance, dances from the Kayes region of Mali like *Dansa* or *Sunu* would be performed for a Khassonké (Xhasonka) family's wedding celebration. And for a Khassonké family of *jeli* caste, dances like *Sandiya* or *Sandagundo* will be performed as well.

¹⁶ *Jeli* singing is also an essential part of ceremonial Mande performance of this kind. *Jeliw* and dancers tend to take turns in the performance circle so as to keep the energy of the celebration moving and the celebrants engaged. There are times, however, when this collaboration is not very effective which results in quarreling among performers, each wanting their time in the "spotlight," and a chance to receive gifts from celebrants moved by their performed offerings. For more on *jeliya* in ceremony see Hale 1998; Hoffman 2000; Charry 2000.

the nationalist dance repertoires of local regional dance ensembles (Fr: *troupes*; Bk: *troupu denw*) that proliferated in the independence era.

The third main category of Mande dance on which I focus this project includes the ensemble or “ballet” repertoire created out of staged renderings of mainly the first, but really of both of the above categories of Mande dance [\[Clip 3\]](#).



Clip 3: Ensemble Repertoire
“Koredjuga” by La Troupe du District de Bamako
Bamako, Mali. August 2009
Footage and photo by the author.
http://youtu.be/t_IVqVA1nYQ

These repertoires are the outcome of the establishment of national performance ensembles (like *Les Ballets Maliens*) in the independence era. They are presented as “Malian dance” for the ways in which they draw together the range of ethnicities that artists and politicians alike claim to “peacefully co-exist” within Malian geopolitical borders. A great deal of creative license is used on the village repertoires so as to make them fit spatially on a proscenium stage (or in a stage-like space) and temporally within the allotted time frame of a single performance.

Artists trained in the ensembles are often meagerly paid and so they use their visibility as members of national or local ensembles to promote themselves as artists for hire to animate celebrations or to perform for or teach foreign tourists.

The fourth and final category of Mande dance that I bring in to my analysis is the studio/dance class repertoire [\[Clip 4\]](#). It basically consists of ensemble repertoire broken down from large flowing choreographies into individual steps or combinations. In snippets, the choreographies are more easily demonstrated and reiterated for foreign dancers who have limited exposure to the other three categories of Mande dance but who, for a variety of reasons, want to learn to dance.



**Clip 4: Dance Class Repertoire
“Madan” with Salli Soumaré
The Yeredon Center for Malian Arts. Bamako, Mali. July 2011.
Footage and photo by the author.
<http://youtu.be/v-wwwQTKkkg>**

The spatial orientation of studio dances is linear and hierarchical with dance instructors in the front of the group and dance students in rows behind them. Students are looking at the backs of their instructors so that they can follow along

while dancing themselves – what I call “watching while doing”. Urban dance studios both in Mali and abroad, often have mirrored walls so that students can visually study the details of their movements as they learn. In these spaces, Mande dance and Malian dance often become “African dance” or “West African dance,” or “black dance,” or “Africanist dance,” depending on the historical assumptions, the political and racial orientations, and even the logistical limitations of the artists, promoters and/or consuming public. The Malian dancers who inform this research are keenly aware of which titles are invoked when and are quite savvy about how to respond choreographically, socially and discursively to the expectations of each community of dancers.

Behind the Scenes: The “Ontology of Performance”

The fluidity of the Malian dance contexts from which *Mobile Bodies* draws and the difficulty of maintaining discursive consistency in addressing the dances that my Malian dancer informants do, points to another perhaps even greater challenge of dance ethnography: representing dance in text. The “ontology of performance,” to use performance studies scholar Peggy Phelan’s coinage, is that “performance’s only life is in the present,” it disappears the moment it comes into being (1993:146). The work of documenting performance, the act of writing about dance, is not an act of preservation or encapsulation but rather an act of memorializing as well as, I argue, an effort towards generating something new and of a different performative register from the performance effectively being documented. *Mobile Bodies* and the “performativity of performance” are my offerings to this end. The former is a

theoretical framework and the latter is a theoretical concept each of which have grown out of my experience observing, talking about, investigating, filming, embodying, and, of course, writing about Mande dance and dancers. But even the most fluid and lucidly descriptive dance writing is limited in its effectiveness in evoking a basic aesthetic sense of what a dance might look like or of the affective qualities it might invoke. This can prove a challenge not only for dance ethnographers, but also for their readers for whom Mande dance let alone “African dance” might be completely unknown.

Throughout this text, readers will find hyperlinks to annotated film clips of the dances and dancers under consideration. The clips are neither footnotes nor are they block quotes, easily skimmed or skipped altogether. They are essential parts of the text and of this thesis overall for they offer a visual and auditory sense (although unavoidably limited) of the performance under consideration. The idea behind using these annotated clips is not simply to provide empirical evidence, but rather to coax readers to open themselves up to the possibility of themselves gaining an embodied understanding – an understanding through their senses - of the performative capacities of mobile bodies.

The Process: Performing Dance Research

The fact that dance disappears the moment it is performed makes writing about dance a process of (re)membering, of concretizing that which is fleeting, ephemeral, and, for many, affective. Writing dancing therefore, is a highly situated process,

unavoidably marked by the positionality of the writer. This skews the anthropological work of observation and of writing with a clear sense of the distinction between the anthropologist's *emic* experience of the dance and the *etic* experience of her interlocutors. Moreover, and specifically with respect to dance in the Mande world, one of the greatest obstacles I had in doing this research was the fact that to dialogue about dance was a tremendously labored and often futile undertaking. I have over the years come to realize that in the Mande world, speech is socially and cosmologically potent. It carries life force (Bk: *nyama*) that can be moved when an individual articulates certain knowledge or reveals implicit information or meanings in socio-cultural phenomena, histories, or objects (Hoffman 2000; Brett-Smith 2014). Silence and evasive speech, therefore, serves as powerful protection to the kinds of effects that moving *nyama* can have (Brett-Smith 2014).

Apprenticing with and dancing alongside my interlocutors proved to be the most generative and illuminating method of research that I used. I danced nearly every day with artists of varying levels of skill, training, and recognition. I danced in workshops for foreign dance tourists and in rehearsals with *La Troupe du District de Bamako*. I offered improvised solos at wedding ceremonies and baptisms, and joined the crowds on nightclub dance floors. I came to each setting upon the invitation or guidance of professional and aspiring dancers and musicians and made danced contributions when the space opened up for me to do so. Knowing full well that spectators' expectations of my offerings as a foreign woman (Bk: *toubabmuso*) were

different (in most cases more lax, but in some rare instances more defined) than their expectations of my Malian interlocutors' contributions, I took great pains to pick up the social and performance cues signaling when it was time for me to draw back into the crowd and when it was time for me to more forcefully join in. As I address in Chapter 2, the moments when I misread cues in performance opened up important avenues for exploring and understanding some of the foundational aesthetic and performance principles of Mande dance. Had I simply watched or had the danced offerings I made been whimsical or uninformed by Mande performance principles (some of which I outline in Chapter 1), I would have missed the ways in which these very principles have social import and impact as well. As we all know, there is always something valuable to learn from our mistakes and my danced mistakes offered tremendous lessons in performative performance; lessons that, given the protective silence of my interlocutors, could not have been encountered in any other way.

Dancing alongside my interlocutors was not simply a practical solution to a consistent and sometimes frustrating obstacle to discursive exchange. Indeed, honing my own kinesthetic mobility in various dance settings in Mali was also an effort to bring my dance (and danced) research in dialogue with the phenomenological idea that our bodies are active components in processes of perceiving and shaping the worlds in which we live (Csordas 1990:36). In recognizing the capacities of my own body to perceive elements of Mande dance and Mande sociality that are both fashioned by and that themselves fashion subjective

experiences of social belonging, I am contributing to the critique of visual, discursive and textual hegemony in the social sciences. I share Stoller's (1989) and Jackson's (1989) radically empiricist view that there is great value in making an effort to generate an experiential understanding of the bodily sensations evoked in the social and cultural encounters under anthropological consideration.¹⁷

A phenomenological approach to the study of human experience opens up ways for researchers to engage what Csordas calls a "somatic mode of attention" which he suggests is a way of "paying attention with [the] body" such that to attend to a bodily sensation is to attend to the "intersubjective milieu that gives rise to that sensation" (1993:138). My methodological approach is thus informed by a somatic mode of attention to the intersubjective experiences I had while dancing with my interlocutors. I nevertheless veer away from Jackson's view that "to recognize the embodiedness of our being-in-the world is to discover a common ground where self and other are one" (1989:135), for no matter how many years I spend honing my body in Mande dance and dancing alongside my interlocutors and teachers, my positionality as a white, upper middle-class, Ivy League educated North American, heterosexual, Jewess will always influence how I move my body when I dance, what I feel in my body when I dance, and what others see when I move my body in dance.

¹⁷ Jackson and Stoller both elaborate on William James' theorizing of radical empiricism that is an approach to building a pragmatic theory of truth that relies upon verifiable experience. James writes, "radical empiricism consists first of a postulate, next of a statement of fact, and finally of a generalized conclusion. The postulate is that the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience" (1914:xii).

Regardless of the inevitable fact that my own subjectivity infuses my kinesthetic engagements with Mande dance, the intersubjective encounters that I had when I danced with professional and aspiring Malian dancers brought me to realize that there are non-verbal logics of performance and sociality that can only be brought to light by dancing. Throughout this dissertation, I offer insights on Mande notions of social formation and social belonging that were revealed through my dance practice. In Chapter 2, for instance, I share the Mande proverb “every day the ear goes to school” (*don o don tulo be taa kalanso na*). Drummer Ldaji Coulibaly recited it as a reminder to me to listen as I move. I soon realized that it also revealed the idea that Mande performance is built on a *sociability* among performers (dancers and musicians listening to one another) and across disciplines of performance (dance and music). I in turn came to realize how the ears “going to school” on a daily basis also speaks to the foundations of Mande approaches to learning: one builds knowledge of self and belonging from daily lessons learned while listening. This points to the ways in which John McCall’s *heuristic ethnography* model (McCall 2000) echoes throughout this thesis as it draws insights not simply from my own danced experience, but for how by dancing with my interlocutors, I was able to draw forth my informants’ experienced-based theorizing about their own lifeways and social processes.

The Acts: How the Thesis Unfolds

Telescoping outward from the body, the chapters of this work keep dancing bodies within view. The first two chapters focus on the kinesthetic aspects of *Mobile Bodies*.

Beginning with an inquiry into Malian pedagogies of dance practice and performance, I offer “Forming Bodies” as an account of how dancers’ bodies are fashioned into articulators and tools of Mande performance and personhood. Next, I move into “Sociable Bodies” to explore the aesthetic parameters of Mande performance and how they are brought to the fore through inter-personal encounters in performance. These encounters foster what I call “performance sociability,” which is the capacity to navigate and negotiate social belonging within and through the act of dancing and making music. The third and fourth chapters of this thesis offer insights into the entangled ways in which kinesthetic mobility plays in to the social and transnational mobilities of the *Mobile Bodies* triad. In “Performative Bodies” I turn to an analysis of the “performativity of performance” to consider how sociable performance on stage influences social status and social mobility off stage. And finally, in “Self-Knowing Bodies” I consider how the Mande concept of *yeredon* or, self-knowing, obliges and mobilizes Malian artists to find and capitalize upon transnational dance and music performance opportunities as a means of achieving social recognition and social respect at home.

CHAPTER ONE

Forming Bodies **Pedagogies of Practice and Performance**

'Ni a kera ne nye na, a kera ne la, be mògò kalan.' If it happens in front of you and you are part of it, it will teach you – you are witness.¹⁸

Malian dancer, musician, choreographer and instructor, Joh Camara, talked to me about the importance of close observation when attempting to learn something. He shared with me the above proverb when I asked him about Mande approaches to learning. “I never had a teacher in Mali,” he explained, “I just learned from watching and then doing it on my own.”

This is not an uncommon claim. In fact, the process of watching or witnessing and then doing is how so many of my Malian musician and dancer friends and informants describe how they learned and developed the foundations of their trade. As children they would watch musicians and dancers from the sidelines of a ceremony or a celebration, a dance troupe rehearsal or performance. They would then head off with their friends, to experiment with the movements and music that they'd seen; fashioning instruments out of discarded buckets and jugs, found bits of fabric, twine, and desiccated tree branches, taming the awkwardness of their growing bodies while working to draw graceful and intentioned rhythmic movement into their limbs, torso, and head. [\[CLIP 5\]](#)

¹⁸ At another time, Joh explained it as: *ni a kera ne la, a kera ne nye na*, if it happens before my eyes, it happens to me.



Clip 5: Watching and Doing
Djicoroni-Para, Bamako, Mali. June 2009.
Footage and photo by the author.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jR7spiWNwxQ>

Music-making and dancing are not the only skill sets for which watching and doing are the central factors of learning in Malian society. Indeed, young girls learn the ubiquitous house-work posture – the deep-waisted bend – necessary for sweeping the courtyard with short thatch brooms, or for washing dishes or clothes in large bowls of water set on the ground, or for preparing *tigadigena* – spicy, savoury peanut stew – over a charcoal fire. By watching and doing, young men learn the nimble- yet sure- footedness of a livestock herder, or of a farmer tending to lumpy crop fields, or of a city *apprentiké* – “apprentice boy” or ticket taker - dodging traffic as he works to draw weary commuters onto public transport vans bursting at the seams.

While these scenes are geographically and culturally specific, watching and doing is not a strictly Malian or West African way of learning. Indeed, social dances like the Jewish *hora*, the American Electric Slide, or Sohoian celebration dances (Cowan 1990) are learned by attending dance events like weddings or coming of age celebrations where one can watch others dance and join-in when the time feels right. Similarly with the proxemics (Hall 1963) of North American city dwellers whose built environments influence somatic behaviors - training them to walk down sidewalks or building halls on the right hand side, or step to the right on an escalator to leave space on the left for those who wish to pass. These behaviors are not explicit lessons taught or rehearsed in schools. They are, rather, a subtle and pervasive presence that people have grown up around, passively watching and eventually doing. They are a “cultural patterning” (Csordas 1990:11) of the body, a honed and self-perpetuating collection of somatic social practices that define, assert, and maintain a sense of social belonging (Bourdieu 1977).

Although it can be argued that “watching and doing” are pedagogical elements at play in a range of cultural settings, they are, as will soon be made evident, prevalent in Mande contexts in ways that we do not often see or hear about in Euro-American discourse or practice (Geurts 2002). Drawing from the testimonies of professional Mande artists, from Mande oral tradition, as well as from my own embodied “radically empirical” (Jackson 1989) on-the-ground experience as a dance apprentice in Bamako, I have found that pedagogies of Mande dance practice and performance - like “watching and doing” - are “culturally” and “performatively

elaborated”(Csordas 1994). In other words, in the Mande world, approaches to teaching and learning (whether mundane or directly associated with arts or crafts production) place the body and embodiment at the center of informal education in highly visible and observable ways. Moreover, recognizing how dance and music performance training in the Mande world revolves around honing the body, highlights the fact that to work on acquiring physical skill and possibly even mastery of a skill is to simultaneously work to present oneself as a respectable member of Mande society.

Following Geurts’ claim that “cultural meanings are embodied” and that these meanings are not “natural” but are, rather, learned from a very young age (2002:231), I argue that in the Mande world, “socially informed bodies” (Bourdieu 1977; Geurts 2002:126) are *socially formed*. And not only by subtle daily encounters like those a person has with her built environment or with local social mores, but also by the deliberate approaches to learning that acquiring an intensely physical embodied skill and/or profession, like Mande dance or music-making, entail. Now, this claim may seem to contradict the “watching and doing” approach that Joh described as the foundations of his professional training. For, as noted above, he claims not to have had the pedagogical structure that a teacher or master provides. However, as Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest, contemporary models of apprenticeship de-center common notions of master-apprentice relations such that the focus of the relationship becomes less about what the master can impart to her or his student and more about the ways in which apprentices can capitalize on

community resources and offerings to garner specific knowledge and skill. In Joh's case, by attending and observing community dance events, studying televised dance performances, shadowing and dialoguing with skilled bards, musicians, and dancers, he was able to dedicate himself to the work of honing the embodied skills necessary to gaining a degree of mastery in the craft of Mande music-making and dance. In so doing, he was noticed (if with subtle side glances, or seemingly detached observing) by acknowledged masters of performance and was from time to time guided and even tested.

In one conversation, he explained that his years of “watching and doing” at ceremonies and celebrations all over Bamako brought him to take-on work as choreographer for a local Bamakois dance ensemble called *Troupe Sewa*. One day, a skilled elder performer unexpectedly dropped-in on a troupe dance rehearsal and pressed Joh to demonstrate to his performers not just the technique of the dance they were working on, but also the social history of that dance. It was a test that Joh claimed he'd “never forget” because without an identified *maître* or, teacher/master, this was one of the first times that a performer with a storied and respected performance history and knowledge placed Joh under obvious scrutiny. Joh's success at demonstrating his familiarity with the dance history, origins, and technique brought the elder to recognize Joh as a Mande artist, and by extension a person worthy of respect.

In the chapter that follows, I lay out what I have identified as “pedagogies of Mande dance practice and performance”: approaches to learning based on “direct experience,” where a person interfaces with professional and social learning in active and embodied ways. These pedagogies, though grounded in the body, are often characterized and addressed discursively. I therefore track them through the numerous proverbs about learning and the body that I encountered in my dance training and fieldwork. In so doing, I consider how Mande approaches to teaching and learning operate with, through, from, and on dancing bodies, and how they fashion not only Mande performance artists, but also socially *informed* and socially *formed* members of Mande society.

Before My Eyes: Watching

Ni a kera ne nye na, a kera ne la.

If it happened in front of my eyes, it happened to me.

Joh’s interpretation of this proverb about learning bears a likeness to participant observation: “If it happens in front of you *and* you are a part of it, it will teach you” (emphasis mine). Watching is an active, if subtle, endeavor that requires patience, self-discipline, and a receptivity to learning. In the context of Mande performance, whether at a harvest celebration, a baptism, a wedding, or even a dance ensemble concert, an essential part of learning to dance or to play music is to take-in the dance first by watching over time, and then by putting one’s whole body into it.

I came to understand this during my ten-month stay in Bamako as an apprentice with the award winning *Troupe Artistique et Culturelle du District de Bamako* from May 2009 to March 2010. I was there to conduct research on the Troupe because it is where most of the Malian artists currently working internationally teaching music and dance to foreigners have done their dance and music training. My first six weeks of participation in daily rehearsals consisted of sitting quietly and watching. At one point, artistic director, Ba Issa Diallo invited me to join the other apprentices (*apprentis*) and dance on the side (*à côté*). That's where I met "Petit" aka: Ibrahima – a small, smiling-faced teenager, with a wiry frame, speedy feet, impressive flexibility and acrobatic agility. Petit was always there, even when full troupe members were too tired, sore, busy or broke to come out to rehearse. It often happened that in the moments before rehearsal, when the troupe would gather, a more seasoned member of the troupe would brusquely call him over only to send him off, immediately, with a tattered bill in hand, for cigarettes, the fixings for tea, or a plate of rice and sauce. Petit would perform a number of menial duties upon which the troupe, whether in rehearsal or in performance, depended: he would set up the benches and drums for the musicians, or he'd fill the water bucket for drinking. He was the gofer, who obediently did his work making tea and running errands and who, at the same time, closely watched the dancers and musicians perform.¹⁹ Every

¹⁹ Dorinne Kondo similarly describes apprentices beginning their training with "tasks having no apparent relation to their chosen trade" (1990: 237) that ultimately served the purpose of "polishing their skills as social beings" (1990:236). The protagonist narrator in Camara Laye's *L'enfant noir* (1984) is the perennial observer of his blacksmith father's workshop. Through the eyes of this child we see a classical Mande system of apprenticeship at work and in the process, the dynamic machinations of Mande caste divisions, socially prescribed behaviors, and belief in the occult are laid bare. The young protagonist at one point describes how his father's apprentices are eager for their turn to finally do work that is less "rudimentary" (*rudimentaire*) than operating the bellows: "Ces

now and then, troupe members would call Petit aside and give him some pointers on a step or combination. Eventually, Petit was invited off the sidelines and into the choreography: first for one number, then for two or three, then for the whole rehearsal, and eventually, to join performances and animations at wedding celebrations. Those moments of watching and learning were exactly as Joh described them: Petit was watching *and* he was taking part.

By watching, we apprentices were not only learning what to do with our bodies as we danced, but we were also taking-in the cultural elements surrounding the practice and performance of dance: the cultural cues that are essential to knowing when in a ceremony or celebration it is appropriate to dance, what dances are acceptable in certain performance contexts, or what and how movements work best with particular rhythms and rhythm phrases (see Chapter 2). We also learned about how master-apprentice (Fr: *maître-apprenti*) relationships work; how the foundation of teaching and learning in Malian society is based on knowing that to watch one's master(s) over time, and to repeat one's observations on one's own, will lead to receiving the attention of one's teacher(s) through direct and simple corrections and instructions, and eventually, as Joh's above mentioned story showed, through a test of skill.

apprentis se tenaient constamment assis, les jambes croisées, devant les soufflets; le plus jeune des deux tout au moins, car ; l'aîné était parfois admis à partager le travail des ouvriers, mais le jeune – c'était Sidafa, en se temps-là – ne faisait que souffler et qu'observer, en attendant d'être à son tour élevé à des travaux moins rudimentaires" (1984:27).

Teachers and friends tested my skills on a number of occasions during my time in the field. One moment that stands out was at one of the first wedding celebrations I attended in Bamako. It was July 2007, I was on my very first visit to Mali, and was invited to attend the *denbafo*, the festivities that take place a day or two before the actual wedding ceremony and celebration, for the revered Malian singer, Djeneba Seck. She had made quite a name for herself, spending a number of years performing in the United States and touring the world. The festivities were therefore elaborate and very well attended: the celebration circle was immense, lines of chairs following the perimeter of a large, dusty soccer pitch; numerous musicians were on hand – including drummers from local ensembles, members of internationally touring music bands, and musicians with residence in the US, Europe, or Japan all home on their “summer” breaks.

Among the musicians was Moussa Traoré, a master *jembe* drummer, living in the United States, known for his extensive knowledge of Mande rhythms, and his signature style of seamlessly flowing in, out, and across a rhythm without throwing off the tempo or the other players. Moussa and I knew each other from community dance classes in Cambridge, MA. He would play lead drum for the Malian dance classes that I would attend and we would from time to time chat after class about Malian dance, music, and life in Mali. My years of West African dance training and performing in the United States made it so that I stood out in the regular community classes in Cambridge. I was familiar with a lot of the choreography that Malian teachers in the United States offered because it was all material drawn from a more

or less standard repertoire performed by the National Ballet of Mali or the *Troupe du District de Bamako*. My skills on American dance floors thus gave me credibility in the highly improvisational setting of the Malian wedding celebration and so, when Moussa saw me sitting on the sidelines, watching dancer after dancer offer “solos” as tributes to the betrothed, he enthusiastically invited me to join in. Heart pumping, I jumped-in with gusto and realized that I had no idea what I was hearing, I didn’t know where the rhythmic accents were, and I had no embodied or intellectual sense of how to seamlessly wave my own movements into the mix. It felt as though I had never danced before; I had somehow all of a sudden grown two left feet.

Stepping away from the dance circle, I quickly realized that just because the musical repertoire of live ceremony may sound similar to the material played in American or European dance studios, and just because the movement repertoire in both places may look similar, the live improvisational performance of a dance celebration is far more fluid than the composed and contained choreography on stage or in a dance studio. Up until this point, I had an intellectual understanding of this distinction but in this moment of awkwardness, the difference between knowing something with the mind and knowing that same thing with the viscera and the senses came into bold relief. Indeed, this experience was for me a perfect launching-off point into my intensive dance training and apprenticeship in Bamako. It helped me to recognize that to garner a good sense of Mande dance and the role that it plays in how Mande people perform and commemorate individual and communitarian milestones,

collective history, genealogy, and social belonging, I needed to move beyond my intellect and into my body; beyond just the watching and into the doing.

Watching and Doing: Apprenticeship and Mande dance

Mógó si tè se k'o la, n'a ma dège a la.

A person cannot succeed at any task without being taught how.

Learning by observing doesn't mean that there are no clear pedagogical elements influencing or guiding the experience of the learner. In my own performance training I encountered two structured approaches to learning, each of which stressed the importance of keen observation, the heightened ability to integrate into one's own movement repertoire that which was being observed, and the skillful performance of that movement in seemingly effortless ways.

The first type of learning scenario is a more "classical" master- apprentice or teacher-student scenario in which an apprentice (who is typically but not exclusively socially-ascribed) undergoes explicit didactic training by a recognized master of a trade. This training by and large takes place within the defined pedagogical and temporal parameters of a workshop, a class, a course, a rehearsal, or a performance and is for the most part dependent on apprentices' abilities to watch their teachers and repeat according to their personal abilities, skills sets, interest, and motivation that which they have observed. Kondo (1990) and Herzfeld (2004) refer to this as "stealing" the masters' skills. In the Japanese case, "learning on the sly" is part of the hardship of training as an apprentice and must be done

because “one could not necessarily count on formalized instruction” (Kondo 1990: 238). In the Cretan case, Herzfeld suggests that apprentices must watch their masters with “well-hooded but cunning eyes” (2004:50) for learning to build a set of skills in an apprenticeship setting is not only about participating in the subtle if seemingly secretive process of transmitting and perpetuating specific cultural knowledge, it is also about how in learning a trade apprentices learn to craft “crafty selves”(2004:52). Kondo similarly argues that as an artisan learns the skill of crafting fine objects, he also learns the skill and strategies for crafting a finer self (1990:241). An apprentice’s social belonging therefore, is not understood solely in terms of the fact that she has learned a trade or set of skills. Social belonging is most importantly asserted and enacted by the manner in which an apprentice uses the skills that she has learned. Indeed, as I discuss in Chapter 3, a dancer can (and in many cases must) strategically reveal and deploy her skill-set in order to be socially recognized and respected.

Honing physical abilities and forming social capacities are not only accomplished in “classical” apprenticeship models, in fact I have seen and experienced what I call the “diffuse” model of dance training, as well. In this model, self-ascribed and self-motivated apprentices observe many dancing bodies in many different dance scenarios in an effort to integrate into their own dance repertoires whatever is retained or whatever can be viably integrated into their own physical skill sets. Lave and Wenger call this a “decentered view of master-apprentice relations” where mastery and the knowledge associated therewith is understood as something that

“resides not in the master but in the organization of the community of practice of which the master is a part” (1991:94). Indeed, many such apprenticeship models (Lave and Wenger in fact argue that most apprenticeship models) have “very little observable teaching;” and that

the more basic phenomenon is learning. The practice of the community creates the potential ‘curriculum’ in the broadest sense... There are strong goals for learning because learners, as peripheral participants, can develop a view of what the whole enterprise is about and what there is to be learned. Learning itself is an improvised practice: A learning curriculum unfolds in opportunities for engagement in practice. It is not specified as a set of dictates for proper practice (93).

This, I believe, is what Joh was implying by claiming that his dance training was not strictly overseen by a teacher, but rather that it was self-directed: him learning to dance and play music by “watching and doing”; observing dance scenarios (be they formal staged performances, music videos, or wedding celebrations) so as to grasp a few rhythmic or movement ideas and to go on to flesh them out with friends and peers outside of the observed performance contexts. Here, learning is not determined by the master-apprentice relationship, but rather by the relationships those seeking to learn set-up with one another. Moreover, the fact that Joh was tested by an acknowledged master of Mande dance and music who asked Joh to explain the social history of the dance that he was demonstrating for his dance ensemble, further exemplifies how mastery depends on skillfully navigating, negotiating and knowing the social context of the trade being practiced.

My own daily dance apprenticeship experiences in Bamako were in many respects in line with each of these apprenticeship models. My Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning classes with a forceful and creative dancer, M’ba Coulibaly (Figure 2), were akin to the “classical” apprenticeship model. While my Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday afternoon rehearsals with the Troupe du District de Bamako youth performance ensemble were in line with the “diffuse” model.



Figure 2: Kadija “M’ba” Coulibaly
The Yeredon Center for Malian Arts, Doumanzana, Bamako, Mali.
January 2010.
Photo by the author.

Working one-on-one with M’ba over an extended period of time helped us to forge a strong mentor-mentee relationship. M’ba made remarkable efforts and sacrifices to work with me. Early in the mornings, she would leave her four young children and her daily household work to meet me at the Yeredon Center for Malian Arts where I

was staying. Climbing across the craggy hills of her neighborhood on the outskirts of town, she often walked the four or five sandy miles to the Yeredon center. She was quite punctual and we would often start-in on our work soon after M'ba arrived. In the western-style dance studio of the Yeredon Center, we would review the steps from the previous day, dancing side by side, watching our reflections in the wall-mounted mirrors.

All of the material that M'ba offered was set to songs and rhythms played by Cheik "Ladji" Coulibaly on *jembe* and Mamadou "Madoujan" Diarra on large cylindrical *doudoun* drums (see Figure 3). Working with these three artists, with M'ba as my dance mentor, and Ladji and Madoujan as my mentors in music, I accumulated a repertoire of movements and rhythms that offered an interesting cross-section of the material one might find in the Malian Mande "songbook". Moreover, in working with a dancer and two percussionists, I was taught daily lessons about the important and subtle ways in which dance and music, dancers and musicians must work together to produce an aesthetically pleasing and successful outcome.²⁰

²⁰ See Chapter 2.



Figure 3: Mentors
Clockwise from top left: the author, M'ba Coulibaly,
Mamadou "Madoujan" Diarra (doundoun), Cheik "Ladji" Coulibaly (jembe).
The Yeredon Center for Malian Arts, Doumanzana, Mali. March 2010.
Photo by Alexander Helsinger.

The rhythms we worked on included "traditional" songs and dances typically associated with village celebrations, but that were recast through the urbanized, cosmopolitan, and transnational influences of the post-colonial national ballet movement of the mid-twentieth century [\[Clip 6\]](#). Our repertoire of material also included contemporary songs and choreographies born out of the ethnic and cultural "admixture" of the cosmopolitan landscape of Mali's capital city, Bamako.



Clip 6: Apprenticing M'ba
"Sogonikun"
 Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts
 Doumanzana, Bamako, Mali. October 2009.
 Footage and photo by the author.
http://youtu.be/N2rY_IoWtk4

I came to work with M'ba because she and her *jembe* player husband, Tchefuru Dambélé (see Figure 4) are old friends and former colleagues of my US-based teacher and the owner of the Yeredon Center, Seydou Coulibaly. M'ba and Tchefuru were collaborators of Seydou's, dancing and making music in his once lauded, now defunct dance ensemble *Troupe Komé José*. I first met them in July 2007 on my first trip to Mali, when I participated in the 3-week dance and music study trip that Seydou and his American spouse, Michelle Bach-Coulibaly, organized that year for American dance and music tourists. I worked with M'ba and Tchefuru on my trip the following summer. And in 2009, when I arrived in Bamako for an extended stay, I decided that continuing my training with them would keep me working within a clear lineage of Mande music and dance practice, one that included my weekly dance classes in Cambridge, MA with Seydou himself.



**Figure 4: The Author with Tchefuru Dambélé
Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts
Doumanzana, Bamako, Mali. August 2007
Photo by the author.**

Over time I learned that M’ba and Tchefuru, in spite of their past collaborations with Seydou (who is revered and respected in Malian dance circles for his leadership, artistic vision, and finessed footwork), are outcasts of sorts. Illiterate and desperately impoverished, M’ba and Tchefuru both learned their trades as performers in local and regional Malian youth dance ensembles in the 1970ies, 1980ies and 1990ies. Their desire to build careers as artists unaffiliated with any ensemble or specific dance community in Bamako, combined with a series of poorly considered and unfortunate professional choices eventually brought them out of favor with influential dance and music personalities (like Seydou), leaving them with few opportunities for work as performers.²¹ Moreover, in Mali’s largely Islamic and socially and aesthetically conformist landscape, M’ba and Tchefuru’s embrace of

²¹ It was no secret that having regular dance classes with M’ba during my summer trips and then throughout my year-long stay in 2009-2010, brought her regular work and as such a degree of financial stability that she and Tchefuru rarely experienced or continue to experience as artists.

what they describe as “Rastafarian” life-ways – wearing their hair in natural locks, smoking ganga, and living close to the earth - stands out as odd and, for many in Bamako, objectionable. Nevertheless, I enjoyed working with them tremendously and particularly appreciated M’ba’s teaching and performance style. Her limitless patience meant that she was committed to repeating a step, a phrase or a whole piece over and over again until she felt I was ready to move on. Her creativity drove her to experiment with tempo and to elaborate on steps in the standard Mande repertoire in ways that I found incredibly interesting and challenging. She and I also became good friends – I spent time with her and her children – and we would invite each other on adventures: me to join her at wedding celebrations or gigs at schools or at Bamako’s open-air Reggae club; she to join me at contemporary dance performances or to participate in contemporary dance workshops. Even as our social lives grew increasingly intertwined, it remained clear that M’ba was my teacher and I was her student. I would defer to her on questions I had about dance material that I found confusing or interesting and out of respect for her hard work and her efforts to make a living as a professional artist, I would give her the money that was gifted to me in recognition of my dance skills at weddings or baptisms. After all, as an apprentice to M’ba, I believed that my accomplishments as a dancer were in many ways thanks to her.

Mb’a was incredibly supportive of my interest in mixing up my dance training - a seemingly unorthodox move in the context of our apprenticeship relationship. She encouraged me to join the *Troupe du District de Bamako* rehearsals, perhaps

because she knew that my apprenticeship there was “diffuse,” and that when asked who my teacher was I would undoubtedly pay tribute to her, thus raising her recognition as a masterful and socially connected dancer. Furthermore, among professional artists, regular work with foreigners is seen as an enhancement of one’s financial capital that in turn gives one’s social capital a boost as well.

My afternoons at the *Troupe du District* rehearsal looked much like the scenario of Petit that I describe above: like Petit, I would join the apprentices dancing in the space behind and off to the side of the main dance floor (well outside of the line of sight the informal audiences that would from time to time stop by to watch rehearsal). In our out-of-the-way space, we apprentices were left to our own devices: watching from behind as full troupe members ran through repertoire, we tried to simultaneously capture and mimic what we could [\[Clip 7\]](#). During moments of artistic debate or water breaks between numbers, we would dissect a pattern and slowly reconstitute it, all the while stealing peeks of our reflections in the glass panes of a nearby door.



Clip 7: Out-of-the-way Apprenticeship
Apprentices watch and imitate Ladj Diakité as he rehearses his solo.
Troupe du District de Bamako rehearsal.
 Bamako, Mali. March 2010.
 Footage and photo by the author.
<http://youtu.be/A4gVzYHi0m4>

From time to time, if we were lucky, a member would look over his or her shoulder at us and, if necessary, repeat the material under question. He or she would sing the rhythm as he or she danced, vocally accentuating and highlighting where and how the movements fit into the song. We would gradually follow along, repeating the movement cycle until the pieces of the step would fall into place. The didactic moment would gradually come to an end leaving us apprentices to repeatedly cycle through the step singing our own musical accompaniment.

The most challenging, if most thrilling, part of dance training was on Thursdays and Sundays, when the dance would move from the “fixed” environs of a dance class or rehearsal, to the streets. Chairs, tents, amplifiers, and loud speakers, would block off stretches of city roads, turning public spaces into the celebration grounds

(*kenemaw*) for private weddings or baptisms. Malian “world music” sensation, Amadou and Mariam, made a place for themselves on the global pop music scene singing about how Sundays are wedding days in Bamako. The bouncy upbeat title track song of their album “Dimanche à Bamako” describes how on Sundays bards, musicians, and dancers don their finery to spend the day playing music, singing praises, and dancing in honor of betrothed and their families (Amadou & Mariam 2004). There is no exaggeration to their narrative, performers work hard to secure gigs playing music and animating guests at weddings big and small. Even when an artist isn’t invited ahead of time, news of a wedding where lauded musicians, bard singers, or hosts are present can spread fast among Bamako’s dancers. Hopping onto motos, performers can arrive at a fête within an hour. I would often tag along, watching as my friends danced their way into celebration circles in hopes that by offering a spectacular solo or two they would garner robust gifts of cash, textiles, perfume and possibly direct invitations to dance at future wedding events. I would from time to time offer an improvised solo of my own. The feeling of a crumpled CFA bill being pressed into my palm in praise of my offering would make me blush. And surely, when my dance was done well enough, my compatriots would benefit – they would be thanked with gifts in recognition for having brought me and for presumably having “formed” me and my foreign body in the ways of Mande performance.

In Bamanakan, *ka dège*, to teach, is understood as “forming” the person whom one is teaching. It is akin to the French notion of training or teaching someone, *de former*

quelqu'un, which semantically suggests that a mentor or teacher fashions her students or apprentices as one would mold a desired figure out of a piece of clay. Mande masters are *dègebaw* (a conjunction of the words “teach” and “big”) and they teach their apprentices or *dègedenw* (a conjunction of the words “teach” and “children”) by guiding them through stages of repeated tasks spread over long periods of time.

Repetition is a major component of dance training in Mali. Indeed, my western-style private dance classes with M’ba as well as the Troupe du District rehearsals were generally referred to in French, as *répétition*. In class, M’ba started me out working on a simple rhythm and step. I’d repeat the step over and over, she’d then add a second step which I would repeat and add to the first, and then a third step would be given to repeat, and so on. My repertoire would grow only when M’ba thought I was competent enough in what she’d shown me; she would lengthen the phrase of a step as my retention and rhythmic understanding grew; she would offer more complicated rhythms as the foundational aesthetics of Mande dance sedimented in my body.²² Similarly was the case in the dance training setting of a performance ensemble like the Troupe du District: whether at a rehearsal, a staged performance, or a celebration, or whether repeating menial tasks like fetching water, brewing tea, or sweeping the dance floor, quietly observing and repeating choreography on the sidelines of the performance are essential to building an embodied knowledge of the

²² See Chapter 2.

form. As one's knowledge and skill builds, that which is repeated shifts from menial and mundane tasks to whole choreographies and improvised solos.

This use of repetition and stages of learning finds its roots in traditional Mande trades and their role in determining social belonging in the Mande world. The Mande are, for the most part, agriculturalists who were at one time served by indentured slaves (Bk: *jonw*), and whose work and social life is supported by the wares produced by specialized professional trades folk (Bk: *nyamankalaw*), which include leather workers (Bk: *funê*), blacksmiths (Bk: *numuw* - who also carve wood and make pottery), and bards or "griots" (Bk: *jeliw*). McNaughton (1988) points out that a "tremendous body of technical expertise is associated with each trade, and it must be earned over many years of apprenticeship that traditionally begin before the novice turns ten" (3). The trades are customarily inherited, (although nowadays, it is not uncommon for children of *nyamankala* trades folk to choose other professions and vice versa) and apprenticeship models of teaching and learning the skills necessary for Mande trades are long-standing institutions in the Mande world. Interestingly, nowadays apprenticeship models can be found applied in a number of newer urban trades and professions in Mali. Tailors, bus and urban transport van drivers, electricians and construction workers all have apprentices whom they mentor through stages of repetitive tasks that build foundational skills and understanding and that grow in complexity and import over time.

The apprenticeship systems that train musicians, dancers, and actors in Mali today, and that I encountered in my own dance training, are similar in many ways to the systems that endogamous clans of “wordsmiths,” “praise poets,” or bards called *jeliw* use. In fact, and as I note in the Introduction, many of the aesthetic and pedagogical elements of bardism or *jeliya* have been borrowed and integrated into contemporary music, dance and theatre production thanks to the democratization of traditional performance practices like *jeliya* in the early years of Malian independence. My learning *about* Mande dance in Mali by learning *to* dance in Mali was therefore inspired by how a *jeli* might learn about the tradition of *jeliya* by learning how to sing the genealogy or praises of a patron or to recite the epic poetry of the region.

Hoffman's (2000) description of her training as a griot in Bamako is resonant with the “watching and doing” training Joh and I both had as dancers and, from what I gather, is more-or-less typical of the region. She learned by staying close to her mentors. She would watch them in wedding celebrations or at baptisms, practice her recitations and singing on her own, and she would do her best to rise to the occasion when her knowledge and skills were tested. One of the greatest lessons she describes having learned in her years of studying Mande *jeliya* was that griot status can only really be claimed, proved, and upheld by “griot behavior” (2000:ix). By this she is referring to *jeliw* knowing when to speak, what to say, and at what volume (16-17), and it brings us back to the notion that learning a trade or a skill is not only

about honing particular physical abilities, it is also about learning how to participate in one's social surroundings.

This type of social learning and social formation is in line with how Coy (1989) describes apprenticeship learning: it is about being educated in “things that cannot be easily communicated by conventional means; employed where there is implicit knowledge to be acquired through long-term observation and experience” (xi-xii). This form of “direct experience” learning is not simply about a blacksmith honing the action in his wrist such that it is stable enough to wield a mallet, while quick enough to bring blows to molten steel before it cools; nor is it only about building the nimbleness and grace one needs to stand out as a dancer. Learning from direct experience is also about *embodying* the social processes with which apprenticeship trades are intertwined. Herzfeld (2004) (drawing from Lave and Wenger (1991)) reminds us, all learning is “situated”: “a person learns as much about social process in general as about a specific craft by arriving at the margins of a group and discovering through experience what will work and what its social consequences will be... Apprenticeship is less concerned with the transmission of craft techniques than with modeling the social values and attitudes within which the craft is practiced” (51). Taking this argument further, and as “watching and doing” techniques of learning exemplify, social formation through the direct experience of apprenticeship is not simply or even primarily discursive, it is, rather abundantly physical and embodied. It is important to point out, however, that learning from the direct experience of watching and doing does not manifest independently of the rest

of the sensorium. Picking-up on aesthetically appealing and socially acceptable standards and flourishes of performance and social behavior relies on that which is *heard* as well. Indeed, I was reminded daily that Mande people must also recognize the role that their ears play in their learning process for, “*don o don tulo be taa kalanso na,*” everyday the ears go to school.

The Ears that Go to School: Listening

Don o don tulo be taa kalanso na.
Everyday the ears go to school.

I danced nearly every day of my yearlong apprenticeship in Bamako. As I grew increasingly familiar with performance repertoires at community celebration events, at dance rehearsals or in dance class, I became ever-more aware of the layered and incredibly subtle complexities of each dance, each movement, each rhythm, each song. As with any process of learning, interspersed among the small daily refinements in skill and knowledge were larger, more jarring realizations about how this trade I was studying “works”. Leaps in growth rarely came without brief moments of humiliation, when gaps in my experience were laid bare for all to see, and for me, as apprentice, to quickly find the motivation to fill-in. Among these moments was when I was working in my dance class with M’ba, Madoujan and Ladjî on the Bamana dance *Kôté*.

We were cycling through a challenging kick/arm-swing combination in an effort to find the obstacle keeping me from staying in the time. Again and again, Madoujan

interrupted the cycle of repetition boldly exclaiming in his deep cigarette-encrusted voice: “Ayi!” (*No!*) “Kadja, Sharon segin a kan!” (*Do it again!*). He carried-on playing the dundun pattern, and watched me intently as I listened for Ladji to play the “break”²³ on his *jembe*. When it came, I stepped onto my left foot and swung my right leg forward into the kick. I hoped that this time around my timing was right... “Ayi! Kadja!” Madoujan again. He stopped the music entirely. Sweaty and intense, he stood up off his perch behind the big *dundun* drums, pointed his stick at me, and said: “Kadja, enough of this.” He stuttered in his unique mélange of Bamanakan and French, which meant that he was utterly serious: “Now is the time for you to know how to come in. The call won’t come at the same place in the rhythm every time. Not all *jembefolaw* (jembe players) pay close enough attention to the dancers and the dance to make sure to ‘cut’ the rhythm for the dancers. So the dancers can’t come into the rhythm the same way every time. Kadja, listen!” He picked up the drum pattern for *Kôté* again. Nostrils flaring, he stared at me, it felt like his eyes were burning holes into my face. He signaled to Ladji to start playing. He called to M’ba to demonstrate. She listened to where the break fell and came in with the dance phrase on which we were working. Ladji played the break on the first set of triple notes, M’ba stepped her left leg forward swinging her right leg into a kick. They stopped and ran through the phrase a second time. This time Ladji called the break on the third set of triple notes, M’ba tapped her left toes on the floor while swinging her arms to meet above her head. We went over it several times, until the lesson sunk in.

²³ Sometimes also called the “call” or in Bamanakan the *tige* (the “cut”), it is a rhythmic or musical signal played as an indication to players to move into the next pattern, to change movements, or to end the performance altogether.

I messily jotted down what I had learned: “listen to the *jembe* for calls to stop, start, or accentuate my movements; listen to the *dundun* to know where to put movements onto the defining rhythm pattern; listen to how the two are working *together* to know where and how to bring in to the dance.” The rest of my dance class was spent testing my ability to listen and bring my movements in accordingly. The rest of my apprenticeship in Bamako focused on honing my skill of listening to the call and knowing when to come in.

Although I was very familiar with *Kôté* choreography, having danced it numerous times in dance classes in the United States and seen it performed in a number of ceremonies in Bamako, Madoujan’s forceful challenge of me served as a reminder that, as with any trade, subtle elements of performance are never entirely revealed for they are not simply aesthetic, they are also social. Indeed, apprentices need time to develop their “social maturity” as bit by bit the constellation of beliefs, mores and values, social roles and genealogies embedded within the work that they are taking on and within the life ways of their social world are revealed. Moreover, skill alone does not determine whether or not apprentices are ready to grow their knowledge of their trade; social understanding by way of knowing the larger social context, role and impact of their work must be fostered alongside their bodily learning.

Kôté was an excellent dance from which to learn this lesson. As the dancing segment of classical Bamana theatre called *Kôtéba*, *Kôté* draws its choreographic content from the dramatic whirling, jumping, and shuffling across the performance space of

Kôtéba's full-body masquerades and marionettes. *Kôtéba* means "big snail" (*Kôté* means snail and *ba* means big) and comes from the fact that its staging formation - concentric rings of spectators, dancers, actors, musicians and singers - resembles the spiraling rings of a snail shell. Okagbue (2007) sees a "deeper symbolism" to the snail shell metaphor: "the *Kôtéba*, just like the snail, carries its world and experience around on its back. It contains within its orbit the entire Bamana world and experience... nothing escapes the panoramic lens of the *Kôtéba*" (136). Brink (1982) makes a similar argument in his discussion of the theatrical element of *Kôtéba* known as *Kôté-tulon* (*tulon* meaning play). He suggests that participants must skillfully display their social knowledge through comedic speech, satire, or dramatic acting and as a result will either achieve the social recognition and praise of success or the shame and social exclusion of failure (424). I argue similarly for *Kôté* the dance: for as a representative dance of Bamana ethnicity,²⁴ the presence or absence of certain qualities of performance in *Kôté*, (like listening to the call and knowing when to come in) can serve as grounds for claiming Bamana social belonging or for being subject to social exclusion. By "schooling my ears" in the various roles that fellow performers of *Kôté* play, I learned that there is a certain "sociability" (Monson 1996) in performance that can be mapped on to social interactions.²⁵ Indeed, close listening allows performers to more effectively interact with one another: dancers can anticipate where drummers will call the break, drummers know how to align

²⁴ Thanks, once again, to efforts by the Ballet National to "perform the nation" (Askew 2002) dances like *Kôté* were presented as representative of one of the many ethnic groups that comprise the Malian nation.

²⁵ I discuss the notion of "performance sociability" in extensive detail in Chapter 2.

accents in their playing with other musicians' playing and with accents in a dancer's movements, and all are expected to know how to read the performance setting and the audience for cues as to when it is appropriate to play and when it is time to stop. It is worth being explicit (if painfully so) in stating that "sending one's ears to school" does not only operate on an auditory level, it is also about the ability to train the rest of the body to properly respond to that which the ears hear. By honing their physical skills and knowledge of their own immediate discipline and of the work of their fellow performers, adept performance artists foster a deep sense of timing (c.f. Chernoff 1979 and "metronome sense") that ultimately highlights the fact that to know when and how to come in with the dance is to have the skills necessary to insert oneself and participate effectively in the social landscape. I address on-the-ground examples of this notion of performers sharing a mutual comprehension of each other's disciplines in the next chapter. For now, suffice to say that in building a sense of one another's skill set, Mande dancers, musicians and singers are cultivating a sociability that is important not only to how they relate as performers but also how to they represent themselves as articulators of Mande culture.

Learning from mothers: Gender and Embodied Learning

Demusonin tulo fila y'a ba ta ye.

The two ears of the little girl are the ears of her mother.

The notion that a little girl learns everything from her mother communicates a Mande awareness of how gender and gendered behavior is learned through the body. In Mande communities, children cut their teeth (both literally and

figuratively) under the close, though seemingly detached, watch of their mothers and in the process are exposed to much of what their mothers see, hear, and do. This exposure combined with some direct instruction, is how Mande children acquire domestic and social skills from the most mundane, like forming in the right hand the perfect ball of rice and sauce and popping it into the mouth without dropping a morsel on the ground; to the more socio-culturally and behaviorally expected, like properly greeting an elder with a handshake, a softly lowered gaze, and with subdued verbal responses to questions about your day and well-being. From a very young age girls and boys learn the distinct gender divisions that are a central part of Mande life-ways: like the little girls, newly stable on their own two feet, who play “mum” pacing the front stoop with baby dolls or even younger siblings tied to their backs, much the way their mothers do to keep babies close by while keeping hands free for other tasks (Figure 5).



**Figure 5: Young girls pretending to cook.
Doumanzana, Bamako, Mali. August 2009.
Photo by the author.**

I have never seen young boys emulating their mother's work by sweeping the family courtyard clean of fallen rice and bones after a meal (domestic work like cleaning, preparing food, caring for children is typically women's work) but I have seen them gathered at the gate of their home evoking father's or uncle's physical labor and production as they industriously fashion toy cars, trucks or bicycles out of scraps of aluminum and discarded bottle caps (Figure 6). Even as young boys remain under the tutelage of their mothers, their bodily formation is nonetheless guided by efforts toward the reproduction of a typically masculine Mande countenance – removed, quiet, and served by women.



**Figure 6: Young boys fabricating toy vehicles out of bottle caps and repurposed aluminum cans.
Doumanzana, Bamako, Mali, June 2009.
Photo by author.**

There are distinctive parallels both in the ways in which “through their mother’s ears” Mande children learn gendered ways of being in the world, and how, by “watching and doing” and by “schooling the ears,” Mande dancers build their

repertoire of movement. In each case, acquiring skills is based upon learning from and through the physical encounters and accomplishments of people who are more seasoned at the skills being observed. Moreover, much like children who are indoctrinated to perform gender in everyday life, in very specific and very physical ways, dancers are inculcated through their bodies to perform gendered markers of performance.

The Bamana dance, *Kôté*, once again serves as an excellent example here. In traditional ceremonial contexts like wedding celebrations, harvest festivities or the honoring of distinguished guests, women and men customarily move in separate concentric circles that run in opposite directions. Each group offers a gendered interpretation of the same foundational step: as the body rocks from side to side dancers touch-step, touch-step, touch-step-step-step. On the last step of the combination, women pivot 180 degrees on the balls of their standing foot to repeat the step facing the opposite direction, while men pivot the 180 degrees in a deep-kneed squat only to pop back up to standing and, like the women, repeat the cycle once more.²⁶ Women's movement in Mande dance typically highlight graceful, airy undulations and an easeful coordinated flow of the arms, torso and head; while men's movements tend toward acrobatics, emphasizing physical strength with rapid transitions between high and low planes. Bent arms and knees serve the masculine dance vocabulary, readying the body for feats of physical strength and acrobatic prowess intended to ignite audience enthusiasm and willingness to abundantly gift

²⁶ See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEmxN-2hznA> for footage of a classical performance of the Bamana dance *Kôté*.

(“spray”) performers with CFA (West African Francs) bills.²⁷ Men perform stunts including flips, handsprings, and diving somersaults. They might also offer themselves up as the foundation of a human pyramid (Figure 7) or from time to time make use of large household objects in nontraditional highly dramatic ways.



**Figure 7: A human tower.
Wedding celebration.
Bolibana, Bamako, Mali. December 2009.
Photo by author.**

I recall one remarkable wedding celebration at which a fearless dancer lit up the crowd with the creative ways in which he performed with a wooden mortar. In West Africa, mortars and pestles are large, heavy household tools typically made of dense hardwood used by women to hull millet and maize for daily meals. I therefore felt justified in my concern as I watched this dancer lay his small, wiry and sinewy body down on the ground as another performer placed a mortar on his abdomen for the

²⁷ CFA, or the West African Franc, is the currency used by the eight independent states in West Africa: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Sénégal and Togo and is named after the financial alliance that they make: *La Communauté Financière d'Afrique*.

lead jembe player to stand atop while playing for a dancer [\[Clip 8\]](#); or at another point in the celebration when this same dancer wrapped his mouth around the rim of the mortar, taking hold of it with his teeth so as to lift it off of the ground without the help of his hands [\[Clip 9\]](#). I felt viscerally alarmed as I watched this skinny dancer muscle his way through this performance and yet it quickly became apparent that even this was his all-out effort to satisfy his audience's interest in being entertained while answering his own need to be paid. And paid he was - a close look at the footage of this performance reveals a moment when a wedding celebrant rushes up to the performer to throw a few CFA notes into the mortar in praise of his fearless efforts.



Clip 8: Performing Mande Masculinity 1
Bolibana, Bamako, Mali. December 2009.
Footage and photo by the author.
<http://youtu.be/Rpv94-i864w>



Clip 9: Performing Mande Masculinity 2
Bolibana, Bamako, Mali. December 2009.
 Footage and photo by author.
<http://youtu.be/UDLXOdU6EJI>

The necessity to perform in a manner that one's audience expects - enacting in one's performance a "social script" that may or may not be in line with one's own way of being in the world - is inflected in the aesthetic and kinetic calculations that Mande artists make. Skinner (2009) argues that calculations such as these are rooted in an "ethics of provisionality" whereby the choices that artists make in their efforts to build meaningful livelihoods oblige them to engage with and to weigh socio-cultural expectations and desires against socioeconomic interests and obligations. I address this issue in greater depth in Chapter 3 on the dynamic and strategic ways in which Malian artists use their dance and music making skills to lay claim to social capital. Suffice to say here that arts performance spaces are not inured to social expectations, for although the stylistic inflections that performers bring into their vocabularies of movement might seem creative or unusual, one can often find social

expectations (especially ones that might enhance social, material, ccultural or network capital) playing an important role in numerous creative efforts.

Dancers cannot survive on dramatic displays of strength and acrobatic skill alone. Indeed, successful dancers are performers who have developed a strong foundation for their performance, a foundation that relies virtually entirely on the feet. Whether movements are masculine or feminine, performed by men or by women, skill resides in knowing how the basic dance pattern held down by the feet fits into the larger musical landscape at play. Once the basic foot pattern is understood, dancers move on to integrate gendered flairs into their performance. As my training with M'ba deepened, the distinctions between what makes a movement pattern “feminine” or “masculine” grew increasingly clear. Our lessons moved from attention to gross details like the general placement of the feet, arms or torso in a basic dance pattern (what I like to think of as the “scaffolding” of the pattern), to increasingly fine and more abstract ones like the overall aesthetic essence or “feel” of a pattern or of a whole choreography. Indeed, in setting a vocabulary of steps to a certain rhythm (or family of rhythms – see the chapter on the aesthetics of Mande Dance) M'ba would often identify women's steps or *muso densen* (literally, “women's dance-feet” where *muso* means women, *don* means dance, and *sen* or feet), and men's steps or *che densen*. It is not unusual for dancers in Malian performance ensembles in Bamako's cosmopolitan setting to learn both women's and men's steps however, in performance, dancers would most often stick to “their side” of the gender “divide”.

Folkloric “ballet” ensembles like the Troupe du District de Bamako and the Ballet National du Mali (among many other local and regional ensembles in Mali) typically organize the choreography of “traditional” dances (i.e., inspired by movement and music performed in village celebrations and representative of the cultural groups from whence the dances, rhythms and songs come) along gendered lines (see [Clip 3](#)). Similarly holds true in “African dance” classes in the United States: men and women typically dance in separate lines and, as with the *Kôté* case just described, tend to perform gendered variations of the same step.²⁸ There are, however, a number of dance steps that are not distinctively gendered in the way *Kôté*’s foundational step is. Indeed, many of the steps in the Mande dance repertoire can be and are shared among men and women, however diacritica of gender tend to sediment in the body and can therefore be found surfacing in a dancer’s style even when performing the most “gender neutral” of steps or movement patterns.

In the last three months of my dance training with M’ba, she shifted the focus of her teaching from making sure that I understood in my body the foundational patterns of a choreography to pushing me to refine the style of my dancing by making it more “feminine”. She one day explained to me that in order to properly perform women’s steps, I had to add “sauce” (Bk: *naji*) to it. This metaphor echoes the Sanskrit notion of *rasa* that Performance Studies scholar Richard Schechner robustly theorizes in

²⁸ African dance classes in the United States have typically followed a standard Western dance pedagogical model wherein dancers are grouped into “lines” in which individual steps or choreographies are repeated as dancers move forward across the floor from one end of the dance studio to the other.

his “rasaesthetics” framework (2001; 2002). Defined in many subtly different, though mutually informing ways, *rasa*’s literal meaning is “flavor, taste, the sensation one gets when food is perceived, brought within reach, touched, taken into the mouth, chewed, mixed, savored, and swallowed” (Schechner 2001:29). When used in the context of South Asian performance, *rasa* indicates the “eight fundamental emotions described in the *Natyasastra*, the ancient Sanskrit manual for performers, directors, playwrights, and theatre architects”(Schechner 2002:233). As with the layered flavors of a good sauce, each *rasa* (though associated with very specific emotions or ingredients, like sadness, disgust or fear) is “an entire range of feelings clustered around an emotional core, a flavoring and savoring of emotions rather than anything fixed” (233). A “rasaesthetics”(2001:28) therefore, is one that implies an engagement of the senses by performers and “partakers” (31) alike,²⁹ for just as “food is actively taken into the body, becomes part of the body, works from the inside” (29), a performance is placed into the bodies of its actors, sedimented into their bodily knowledge, and offered up for partakers to themselves integrate into their cache of sensorial memories, and to in turn offer up a reaction: an applause, a grunt, a repositioning of the limbs, a flurry of emotions or intellectual thoughts.

²⁹ Schechner’s “rasaesthetics” treatise (2001) calls for a broadening of scholarly thought about theatre and performance, one that reaches beyond the understanding that people encounter theatre and arts performance strictly through what their eyes or ears perceive. This being the case, he advocates for using “partakers” in the place of “spectators” or “audience” in an effort to undermine the tendency in Western social thought to privilege eye or ear over the rest of the sensorium.

Similarly can be said for the *naji* that M'ba described: it is not just that women dance with "finesse" and men with "force" so much as there is a fluidity of movement associated with women's dance; an unctuous flavorful soup, poured atop a simple starch. It seemed impossibly apt that M'ba's use of this culinary term, so directly drawn from Mande women's domain, described only women's dance. In fact, she refined her point about *naji* saying that men can dance women's steps and that women can dance men's steps, however "men do women's steps with less finesse," and besides, "men can't ever be like women because they don't have breasts and they can't give birth".³⁰ Here again, the alchemical capacities of the human body serve as a guiding metaphor for understanding performance: just as child bearing women take in and transform substances from outside their bodies to produce biological life, dancing women take in dance movements, songs, and melodies to produce and, in some instances transform, social life.³¹ From M'ba's point of view, therefore, there is not only a culinary aspect at play in determining the aesthetic essence of a person's dance abilities, there is also a biological one. I never did learn why she believed that female biology was essential to a performer's capacity to bring *muso naji* (women's sauce) into a performance, but was nonetheless intrigued by how it conflicted with the observations that she shared with me a few days earlier as we discussed the distinction between what it is to dance with finesse

³⁰ M'ba Coulibaly personal communication, 1/26/2010.

³¹ I use the term "take-in" with a great deal of hesitation here for it connotes that West African women have a greater degree of agency and choice as to whether or not to bare children. I use the term nonetheless to make the point that M'ba clearly sees a connection between a women's biology and her ability to evoke the *naji* aesthetic or essence in her bodily movements.

versus what it is to dance with force: she explained that the American women whom she's seen come to dance in Mali never dance with finesse -- it's all force.³²

The majority of Malian performance artists who work abroad as dancers and musicians are male. In fact, I have only encountered one female Malian dancer living and working abroad as a professional performance artist. This leaves the bulk of knowledge transmission and live Malian dance representation outside of Mali in the hands of male dancers. This being the case, even though African dance classes in the United States often spatially organize dancers according to gender, and even though dancers are frequently taught gendered movements, American dance protégés nonetheless work to integrate into their movement vocabularies a repertoire that is almost entirely presented and interpreted by men whose physicalities are imbued with Mande ideals of gender and the types of social belonging implicated therein.

"Sisterly" Men: Bending Gender in Mande Dance

Although nearly all of the professional Malian dancers living and working abroad perform in a masculine style, not all male Malian dancers in Mali "stick to the gender script". Shedding the muscle-bound displays of masculinity, "sisters" (Fr: *souers*)

³² Interestingly, in February 2014 I attended a dance workshop at Brown University with Solo Sana, a Malian dancer trained at the Troupe du District de Bamako now living and working in the United States, who encouraged his students to "add salt" to their dance. I later described M'ba's *naji* metaphor to Solo and asked him if salt is the parallel metaphor describing men's movements. He laughed and said that it wasn't, that he just used the term "add salt" in an effort to encourage students to bring greater "finesse" and largesse to their movements (3/4/2014). So, here, too Solo was using a culinary metaphor as a means of describing how to integrate feminine aesthetics of performance into dance movements. Moreover, as a male dancer who has a distinctive feminine flair he was not only able to describe students how to bring the finesse, but he was also able to exemplify it with his own performance.

overcome the biological limitations of their male physiques and the social conditioning of their masculine bodies, bringing feminine “sauce” to their dance instead. With limbs elongated, movements linked in a seamless flow, and finessed undulations of the arms, shoulders, sternum, back, and buttocks, *soeurs* entertain audiences with flair. *Soeurs* are known to shed elements of masculinist performance when not on stage, as well: dress and social and physical comportment, though evidently “masculine,” carries with it certain “feminine” qualities. I found that those referring to a male dancer as a *soeur* would always do so in a playful tone, all the while making sure they were out of earshot of the *soeur* himself. Talking with Europeans and Americans familiar with the *soeurs* of the *Troupe du District de Bamako*, conversations would inevitably and predictably devolve into discussions of how “sisterly” comportment might indicate sexual orientation, i.e., that *soeurs*, whether married to women or not, whether having sired children or not, are gay.

I was rarely privy to conversations about homosexuality in Mali, and since I went into the field with no explicit intention of interrogating gender and sexuality in the Mande world, I can really only base my analysis here on tangential conversations and anecdotes. That said, in looking back, I now realize that my work took me into social milieux where gender norms were not only constantly, if subtly, being reinscribed but also where these same norms were from time to time being transgressed. Indeed, while “power moves” and acrobatics are meant to be a testament to, if not a performance of male dancers’ masculinity and by extension their virility, male dancers who take on female dance roles and styles, and who do it

well (i.e., “dance like a woman”; c.f. Young 1980) are thought to be undermining normative Mande gender binaries. That said, it is not clear to me that Malians necessarily take the same logical step as my American and European informants do in presuming that male dancers who undermine normative gender categories necessarily transgress heteronormative sexual behavior. Mande people place huge emphasis on the importance of extending the family line (Bk: *fasa*), and thus consider child rearing an essential part of self-realization. Knowing this, one could easily presume that homosexuality is a category of experience that would be silenced, if recognized at all.³³ Indeed, on a short visit to Bamako in July 2011, I was invited by an American dance tourist to serve as an interlocutor in a conversation she was having with two dancers about marriage and social relations in Mali. In so doing, I was asked to inquire what these dancers thought about homosexual relations. The dancers looked puzzled by these questions, not really knowing what sexual relations between two people of the same sex was: what would it look like? Physically, how could women have sex with women? How could men have sex with men? In their experience and their imaginations (at least as they performed them for me), homosexuality was non-existent.

One direct conversation about sexuality in Mali does not empirical evidence make however, what it does do is highlight the tendency among my American and

³³ Epprecht (2009) in talking about what early ethnographic accounts of African sexualities “got right” suggests: “African societies tended to place an extremely high and prodigiously overdetermined value on heterosexual marriage and reproduction. Individual sexual desire was largely subsumed to the broad interests of the extended family or lineage” (37).

European interlocutors to approach questions about sexuality in the Mande world with the foundational presumption that “antinormative sexuality” (Desmond 2001:6) in Mali is enacted and understood in the same way it is in North America or Europe. Epprecht’s (2009) sanguine analysis of the role of early European, American, and some European-educated African ethnographers in imposing (if inadvertently) hetero-normative sexuality on the African societies that they studied offers an important reminder to remain diligent in distinguishing *emic* from *etic* perspectives, and in recognizing the “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2005) of sexuality (c.f. Matory 2003). There is often a distinction between that which is discursively proclaimed or admitted and that which actually happens. Moreover, it is easy to lose sight of the ways in which even the most fundamental understanding of physicality and biology is imbued with and influenced by socio-culturally situated ideas about the very “human-ness” of behavior. That said, it is nevertheless clear to me that just as Mande performance serves as a space for articulating and re-enforcing normative gender and sexual behaviors, it is also a space where antinormative articulations of gender and sexuality can be, at least for a time, normalized.

I witnessed this repeatedly as I watched Madou Démbélé (Figure 8), a star dancer and actor in the *Troupe du District de Bamako*, “queer” male Mande performance both on stage and in daily life.³⁴

³⁴ I follow Desmond et al. (2001)(2001) who in their work on dance and sexuality suggest: “*Queer* in this context stands for all that is not heteronormative and is a practice of symbolic production or interpretation that anyone, whether self-identified as ‘gay’ or ‘straight,’ can initiate about anything, whether the subject is associated with gay subculture or not” (11).



**Figure 8: Madou Démbélé
Bamako, Mali. August 2009.
Photo by author.**

He would regularly abandon the diacritica of Mande masculinity – machismo, muscularity, strong silence – for more “effete” expressions of style and physical comportment. For instance, while a number of his fellow male dancers would come to rehearsal covered in grease from the day’s work fixing motor bikes, or stiff limbed from chauffeuring cars or from carving drums, Madou would waltz in, energized, hips swinging, arms swaying, donning a striking outfit: tight fitting jeans, glittery t-shirts, and white-white sneakers; or *complets* (full shirt and pants outfits) made of elaborately patterned African prints or of fine richly dyed damask (*bazin*) with elaborate jewel-like embroidery and with extra wide sleeves to enhance the graceful flow of his arms. In the style of Mali’s numerous great diva performers, Madou would often make a pronouncement of his arrival, dramatically entering the

rehearsal courtyard with a song, arms raised, eyes closed, head high. Once rehearsal would be called to begin, he would embrace the experimental ethos of the setting, taking advantage of the performative leeway it provides. Performers would file off to draw rehearsal clothes from the shared bin of sweaty, dirty garments. The men would come out donning tee-shirts, tank tops, or bare chests over baggy cotton pants discarded from old Troupe costumes. The women would dance out in form hugging spandex pants and sports tank tops, hips wrapped with small headscarves modestly covering the buttocks and crotch. Although Madou would most often emerge in “gender neutral” clothing – a tank top and pants that were somewhere in between loose and form fitting, it was not uncommon for him to join rehearsal wearing women’s exercise pants and a tank top that hugged-close to his barrel chest. In spite of the feminine elements of Madou’s physical comportment and choice of clothing, Madou would most often rehearse and perform with the men but would, when necessary, play key female roles when seasoned women dancers were not present to do so. He would drape his waist with fabric for modesty, from time to time wrap his head with a borrowed headscarf, and would excitedly jump-in to the women’s role he was filling. His knowledge of Troupe choreography was extensive and his skill in bringing “women’s sauce” (*muso naji*) was so refined that there was rarely a concern of him throwing-off the concentration of his fellow dancers or slowing down the Troupe’s progress as dancers reviewed their theatrical repertoire.³⁵

³⁵ Which in this genre of performance – typically referred to as “ballet” - includes music and dance. See Introduction for a summary of the genre of performance produced by dance ensembles like the Troupe du District and for a history of its relationship to classical European ballet.

Performance ensembles like the *Troupe du District de Bamako* for all intents and purposes serve as social clubs for its members. Performers come to rehearsal with tales of woes or successes. They might share stories of illness or injury, or show peers prescription notes for medications that they often cannot afford. They might equally show-off the gifts that flush patrons (*jatigiwi*) doled out at a wedding celebration as enthusiastic praise to the grace or forcefulness of their dance; or they might offer accounts of their time working on music videos, or as instructors of foreign dance students; or they might express their frustrations over not having work at all. Ensembles offer what Turner might call a “liminal” social manifestation where *communitas* is formulated outside of daily life, outside of mundane time, so that people of that *communitas* can together re-fashion, re-create, and re-articulate their sense of self and social belonging (Turner 1977). Rehearsals can therefore be understood as a “safe space” where *soeurs* like Madou can play-around with the diacritica of Mande gender. It is in this “betwixt and between” (Turner 1977) space of rehearsal where artists can experiment with gender roles and gendered styles of performance and where they can develop the skills by which they can “borrow” dance styles from the “opposite” gender, and integrate them into their personal dance vocabularies. In so doing, they are honing their abilities to fruitfully “bend-gender” in performance outside of the confines of the *communitas* of the ensemble and to thus receive praise and accolades for the aesthetically pleasing ways in which they dance.

The results of using dance environments as spaces in which dancers hone and put to work the skills for re-articulating social belonging are most evident in watching artists like Madou move from *Troupe du District* rehearsals to community festivities. At the *denkundi*, or baptism, of the newborn son of troupe member Baba Tounkara, for instance, Madou dominated the solo circle with his spectacular interventions that seamlessly wove together masculine and feminine dance vocabularies. Clothed in an elaborately embroidered pants and shirt outfit of beige and brown floral wax print, his thrilling improvised solos garnered him enthusiastic approbation from the event celebrants gathered-round. His airy footwork and impressive transitions from an upright torso to a deep-waisted bend were subtle though perfect combinations of masculine athleticism and feminine rootedness through the pelvis. His open-armed extensions helped him to take flight, and yet were softened by the ways in which the unique if dramatic flair of his billowy shirt-sleeves accentuated his arm rotations. At one point, Madou brought a solo that referenced the crescendo combination of a solo offered earlier in the day by Jolie, one of the Troupe's strongest and most skilled female dancers and singers [\[Clip 10\]](#).



Clip 10: Bending Gender
Madou Démbélé
Bamako, Mali. June 2009.
 Footage and photo by the author.
<http://youtu.be/384MrurxTwg>

The movement was approached through a series of repetitive motions: facing the drummers, Jolie's was a deep-waisted side-to-side shuffle with the arms and hands at waist height moving like the wheels of a train, in parallel vertical though temporally off-set circles, while Madou, swinging his arms in opposition to his legs took lateral running leaps into 180 degree jump turns. Then all of a sudden, each dancer maneuvered out of the repetitive steps (each of which ran in tandem with the rhythms played) and launched into the same rhythmically cross-cutting crescendo combination. Jolie jumped to cross her right leg over the left, then quickly uncrossed the legs, planted them hip-width on the ground beneath her and proceeded to punch her right buttock with her right hand, her left buttock with her left hand and then folding deeply at the waist, she punched her right hand into the space in between her wide-legged stance. Madou similarly jumped into a wide-

legged stance but instead spun his arms around like pinwheels before comedically punching each buttock and like Jolie, folding deeply at the waist as he punched the air in between his wide-stance legs. Each resolved their rhythmic departures by returning to repetitive dance phrases: Jolie moved her arms at waist height in toward and away from the body as one at a time she tapped her heels on the ground in front of her. Madou, his feet turned out, bounced between a 70- and 90-degree knee bend as he moved his shirt around his waist as though offering a subtle allusion to the power of the pelvis. Although each dancer garnered praise and recognition of their skill, Jolie drew entirely from feminine dance aesthetics while Madou gracefully danced between masculine and feminine codes, leaving no one uneasy about the ways in which he was quite evidently blurring the lines between masculine force and feminine finesse. Indeed, much like Charlie Chaplin, whose artistic success was rooted in a comedic sensibility, in a dancer's body awareness, and in the ability to subtly borrow from feminine dance aesthetics (Franklin 2001), Madou's successes as a male dancer, I contend, grow out of his distinctive gender-bending style.³⁶ Both artists, by "feminizing" their performances gave them the means by which to appeal to men and women alike and to in turn lay claims to the financial and social capital that successful artistry engenders.

³⁶ Franklin (2001) argues that Chaplin's unprecedented success as a screen actor was rooted in the fact that he was an exceptional dancer but that because in the early 20th century dance was largely the domain of women (and homosexual men), Chaplin had no choice but to couch his dancery tendencies in comedy.

Desmond, riffing off of Butler (Butler 1990), suggests that queer performances are “reiterations” of social identities that in the process of repetition “allows for change through misperformance” (Desmond 2001:12). Although Madou’s masterful enmeshments of masculine and feminine styles of dance are fascinating reiterations of social identities and in turn social belonging, I wouldn’t go so far as to suggest that they are “misperformances” for labeling them as such distinctively suggests that Madou’s aesthetic choices are random and mistaken. In fact, it seems more likely that Madou’s gender-bending presentations are intended and strategic – the skillful ways in which he draws together masculine and feminine dance vocabularies, referents, and styles brings him recognition and respect as a professional and pleasing performer.

With watchful eyes and attentive ears, Malian dancers train their bodies to move in aesthetically pleasing ways. Whether dancers learn their trade through un-mentored observation, or through more formal systems of apprenticeship, the fact remains that their formation is neither purely physical nor wholly aesthetic; it is social, as well. The process by which Malian dancers integrate repertoire and style into their movement vocabularies is also a process by which their bodies are socialized. Professional dancers negotiate social belonging in the *communitas* of dance ensemble rehearsals, in the set choreography of formal performance events, and in the improvisations of wedding celebrations. Knowing the contours of performance contexts and collaborations, skilled dancers strategically invoke and at times reconfigure gendered diacritica – all in an effort to harness the social and

financial capital that aesthetically and social pleasing dancing engenders. But physical skill and social savvy alone cannot bring dancers to achieve social recognition indeed, a profound understanding of the ethics and aesthetics of Mande performance is essential to a successful performance, and it is to this issue that we now turn.

CHAPTER TWO

Sociable Bodies

Performance Sociability and the Aesthetics of Mande Performance

Bamako, Mali. November 2009. My cell phone rings...

"Sharon, *I ka kene?* How are you? *Siriman Sissoko don.* It's Siriman Sissoko. *Venez a une grande fête le dimanche. La grande vedette, Dédé, voudrez que tu l'accompagnes à une marriage.* Come to a big celebration on Sunday. The big star would like for you to accompany her at a wedding..."

My heart drops to my stomach. Respected cultural ambassador and son of Dédé Kouyate, living legend and icon of classical Mande *jeliya*, is extending an invitation from the celebrated *jelimouso* herself to dance at a wedding that she is facilitating. My knees buckle, my face flushes hot. Of course I will go, I am much obliged! The mere thought that this diva of Mande griot music is casting a vote of confidence in my dancing abilities and, by extension, in my understanding of the intricacies of *jeliya* and dance in Mande celebrations is enough to make me swoon!

I sweat the details: I practice my moves for the rhythms that I am certain will be played, I have an outfit made, I go to sleep early the night before the celebration to make certain I am sharp the next day. We're the first to arrive: early, 10am. Event tents set up on a dusty soccer pitch provide shade for the stacks of chairs and rows of overstuffed couches from the rising sun. The pitch is still. Two flea-bitten dogs

scratch in the dirt, anticipating the food scraps that they will scavenge once the festive meal is done.



Figure 9: Event Tent
Baco-Djicoroni ACL, Bamako, Mali. December, 2009.
Photo by the author.

A pick up truck approaches, two young men jump off. They haul out the sound system and start-in on setting up. The multi-channel soundboard and numerous amplifiers, as well as abundant seating indicate that before too long, Bamako's elites will present themselves in flamboyant regalia and unquestionable splendor.

"Dédé Kouyaté be min?" "Where is Dédé Kouyaté?," we ask. *"Yanfe, over there..."* A soundboard boy motions with his chin toward the host family's house. Down the road we spot the diva herself stepping out of a car. She cuts a fine figure: her small, 78 year old body, stooped from a lifetime of gravity drawing her toward the dusty earth, looks glorious enrobed in copious yards of the finest dyed damask (*bazin*) fabric. She greets host family members. Shaking hands, she coaxes smiles and

giggles with her poetic comments and wit. Within moments, other *bazin*-draped grandes dames surround her. Chairs are whisked out of the house and offered as perches from whence the diva and her entourage can oversee final preparations for the celebration.

I greet Dédé with a curtsy and a handshake. She peers at me through her one good eye: “*Soyez les bienvenues! Welcome!*” She recognizes us right away, “*Aw sigiw! You sit!*” Her words materialize chairs. We sit for hours, waiting anxiously, for the arrivals, greetings, and hand shaking to give way to music, song, oration, and dance.

The celebration begins. We relocate to the tents where the chairs and sofas are now set in neat concentric rows. Carload after carload of large women dressed in their biggest, finest jewelry and most colorful *boubous* arrive. The grandeur of the scene grows exponentially with each new arrival. I watch in awe, a fly on the wall.

I know my time to contribute is nigh, as the frequency of glances and murmurs about me, the unknown foreign woman (Bk: *tubabumuso*), grows: “*Ale nana ka donke...*” “This one here has come to dance, she’s here to dance...” Dédé does her work of making certain that each person – performers, patrons (Bk: *jatigiw*), invited guests, and onlookers – is appropriately placed around the celebration space (Bk: *kénéma*). She invites me to sit in the front row, next to the musicians.

As the space fills, Dédé peps up the crowd and the drummers: “*An nana ka fêter de ke!*” Dédé’s hoarse voice cuts through the air thick with dust and heat. She waves her *bazin*-draped arm about and walks around the circle: “We’ve come here to celebrate, to have a good time, to dance! There are no problems here. There are only good things. We came to dance, this *toubabumouso* came to dance...” my heart jumps, my cheeks grow red hot.

Dédé directs the pace of the drummers throughout the celebration. The songs she sings determine rhythms that they play. She signals to them when to speed up or to slow down. Her 20-year-old grandson, Seyba, plays lead *doudoun* in the typical *Khassonké* regional style;³⁷ his cylindrical drum hangs from a long strap slung over his shoulder. He beats out drum phrases with one hand and with the other accompanies himself with a bell cradled between his thumb and middle finger (Figure 10). He and his accompanying drummers approach and surround the women whose *fasa*, or family heritage Dédé recounts and praises. The greater the emotion the performers stir-up, the greater the pay off; 10 000cfa bills (the equivalent of \$20 USD) abundantly and ceremoniously doled out.

³⁷ The Khassonké ethnic group looks to Kayes, the first administrative region of Mali, as its place of origin. Khassonké communities spread throughout the region and into bordering Mauritania, Senegal and Guinea. The *Dansa* and *Sandiya* rhythm families are associated with Khassonké performance and are typically accompanied by *dundun* drums that players sling over one shoulder and *tama* talking drums.



Figure 10: Dédé Kouyaté, *jelimouso* extraordinaire with her grandson, *doundounfola* Seyba Sissoko. Baco-Djicoroni ACI, Bamako, Mali. December, 2009. Photo by the author.

I wait and listen for my call. This is my big test, a high caliber performer asks me to accompany her. I am therefore expected to know how to recognize my drum call and to know what to do when it comes. The pressure is evidently too great, for the moment that I detect what seems like a pause in Dédé's praise singing, the moment that I take a deep breath and step out to dance for the drummers, Seyba takes one look at me, and with eyes bulging and jaw clenched he exclaims: "*Non! Pas maintenant! Attends d'abord!* No! Not now! Wait a moment!" Humiliated, I step back to my seat and watch the drummers play their way across the *kénéma* for the umpteenth time, to collect copious sums of cash from a woman whose lineage and praises Dédé sang. I shrink into my seat and jot down my immediate thoughts:

“Being an anthropologist is about accustoming oneself and giving-in to humiliation –
il faut se soumettre!”

Looking back, of course, this moment of humiliation did not simply remind me of the many professional hazards of ethnographic research, it also served as a pointed lesson in the foundations of Mande performance. By allowing self-concern to drive when and how I would insert myself into the performance, I was disregarding the other performers and the craggy landscape of performance that we were co-creating. My anti-social individualist desire to prove myself, overshadowed the fact that Mande performance is grounded in a complex and dynamic matrix of social relations that play-out on and off the proverbial dance floor; relations that I call “performance sociability”.³⁸

In this chapter, I investigate the contours of performance sociability in the context of Mande performance. Bringing my training in Mande dance, as well as conversations (both formal and informal) with Malian artists, in dialogue with several foundational and notable texts about West African and Africanist arts aesthetics and performance (Thompson 1973; Chernoff 1979; Charry 2000; Gottschild 1996; DeFrantz 2002; Gottschild 2003), I explore the necessary factors that Malian artists and patrons consider when working to make dance and music events, like the celebration just described, aesthetically and socially pleasing or, “sweet” (Bk: *akadi*).

³⁸ I draw from Ingrid Monson’s work on Jazz improvisation in which she suggests that “musical sociability” among jazz players is an important part of making music that is aesthetically appealing (1996). I return to this in a few pages.

In so doing, I offer a framework for performance analysis that considers how the aesthetic – the visual, the sonic, the kinetic, and the affective - can be used as an embodied articulation and, at times, re-negotiation of the social.

I undertake this exploration by teasing apart the factors at play in fostering the capacity to be sociable in performance: to interact with fellow performers with an active awareness of and sensitivity to the ways in which arts production and performance are themselves interpersonal encounters. Performance sociability is not a “natural talent”; it is a skill fostered over years of training and through what I consider an aesthetic “socialization,” within performances ranging from pleasingly sweet to jarringly “bitter”. Dancers who offer “sweet” performances harness the capacities of their physical body to their intellectual understanding of: the music with which they dance; of the stylistic preferences (or, tastes) of the audiences for whom they dance; and of the relative social positions that they and their audiences occupy. In the pages that follow, I consider the roles that a dancer’s *musicality* and her *style of dance* play in creating an aesthetically pleasing performance. In so doing, I ask: how might aesthetic choices be influenced by social expectations, obligations or desires? And, by extension, how might social expectations be influenced by the aesthetic choices made by performance artists? In making this intervention, I am putting forward a framework that scholars can use to analyze how performance, aesthetics, and sociality might refract off of one another in genres other than the West African one considered here. Indeed, by building and applying this framework, I am suggesting that paying close attention to the aesthetic details of a highly

embodied performance discipline reveals how human socio-cultural interactions can be both represented *and* actively re-negotiated within a single performance.

Performance Sociability

In her work on American Jazz, Monson (1996) suggests that “musical sociability” is the successful “collective interplay” (5) between members of an ensemble where “interacting musical roles are simultaneously interacting human personalities, whose particular characters have considerable importance in determining the spontaneity and success of the musical event” (7). Performers who work “sociably” produce an “aesthetically desirable groove” (8). Similarly, in Mande performance, performers bring “who they are” -- their genealogy, their family history, their name, their training, their embodied experience, their knowledge -- in conversation with one another in an effort to produce an aesthetically and socially pleasing or “sweet” outcome. Although no one explicitly said anything about my participation in the above described wedding celebration, it was clear that my obliviousness to the social, performative, and aesthetic mechanisms at work at the moment when I jumped in to dance created a performance that was distinctively “not sweet” (Bk: *man di*).

What makes a Mande performance “sweet”? and who decides? Bourdieu (1986) reminds us of the ways in which the viewer’s gaze and, by extension the artist’s hand (or body, as the case may be) are historically and socially situated. “A work of art,” he writes, “has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the

cultural competence, that is the code, into which it is encoded" (2), and this cultural code is ultimately set by the class-inflected tastes of the artists and of the people for whom the artists are making work. Mande performance, therefore, is a form of popular music-making, singing, dancing and theatrics that reflects the performers' and audience members' socio-historical allegiances and origins.

The wedding emceed by Dédé, was hosted by the director of Malian airports with close (and fruitful) connections to the government.³⁹ Wedding guests were for the most part well-endowed individuals (including the First Lady) who readily drew large bills of *francs CFA* from their brimming pocket books to give to performers who made clear and pleasing references to their personal success or more importantly to their family heritage or, *fasa* (their region of birth, their ancestors, their caste) in song, rhythm or dance. In so doing, performers were simultaneously paying tribute to their patrons' place in Mande society while singing, drumming or dancing their own positionality as performing artists. The more money, applause, and vocalizations they generated from the crowd, the more established they became within a world of Mande popular performance and celebration.

Understanding performance sociability and "sweetness" in a Mande context

requires an understanding of Mande performance. Dance, song, oration, theatre,

³⁹ The government at that time was led by Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) and was thought by many (although probably not overtly by those in attendance at this wedding) to be corrupt and completely inept. ATT has since been overthrown (on March 22nd, 2012) by a coup d'état that ultimately resulted in the election of Ibrahim Boubacar Keita (IBK) as president who, by all accounts, is even more obviously corrupt than his predecessor. For example, see <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/poverty-matters/2014/may/16/mali-president-boubacar-keita-private-plane-international-aid-donors> (accessed 10/6/14). (Bamako n.d.)

costume, even hair styles specific to the region stretching from Benin in the south, along the western coast of Africa to Mauritania, inland to Mali and Niger and south to Chad (Charry 2000) create a landscape of performance where actors are expected to bring their social positions, social knowledge and savvy sociality to bear on their artistry. The lyrical orature, genealogical recounting, praise songs and story telling of *jeliw*, or griots, are the foundational Mande performance traditions most commonly associated with performance practices in West Africa. Their performance sociability is largely grounded in the fact that *jeliw* are expected to know who their patrons (Bk: *jatigiw*) are – not just by name, but by origins, family history, and genealogy – and to be well aware of how their own family histories determine their present day sociality with their patrons as well as with other *jeliw* (see Hoffman 2000). This important knowledge set influences what *jeli* musicians and singers perform, when and where they perform, and for whom.

Although *jeliya* (griot practice, also referred to as “griotism”) tends to corner the market in Mande performance (at least in terms of how people beyond the West African Sahel understand performance in the Mande world), there is a wide range of theatre, dance, and musical styles not-typically associated with *jeliya* that also comprise Mande performance.⁴⁰ Some of these styles, like *jeliya*, are customarily associated with a lineage of performers, others however are performed by people

⁴⁰ Bamana mask traditions like the clowning antics of *Koréduga*; the spiraling dome-like full bodied *kono* bird mask of *Kôté* dance theatre; or *Chéblénké*'s acrobatic references of to nimble animals of the Sahelian shrublands bring comedy, folklore, physical prowess, and mysticism into Mande performance. Mandinka dances of the *Sungurubanin* antelope, of *Dídadí* troubadours or even the now internationally known *Doundounba* dance of the strong men are also a part of the craggy landscape of Mande performance.

drawn by curiosity, interest, and physical aptitude. Furthermore, given the role that theatre, dance and music-making had in Mali's post-colonial nation building and subsequently in the nation-state's presence in global neoliberal economies, it has become increasingly common for people with lineages not connected to the arts to nonetheless build careers as actors, dancers or music-makers. It is essential, therefore, for artists to know their social place and role within and with respect to the performance tradition in which they are engaged, whether or not they are participating in or generating Mande performance traditions associated with family inheritance or praise-singing. In these contexts, performance sociability relies in large part on a performers' abilities to relate through their artistic skill sets (rather than mainly through their family lineages) to one another and to their audiences during a performance.

An artist's role in a performance is determined by her or his performance abilities. The Mande case typically includes singers, musicians (playing melodic and percussive instruments), and dancers. As Dédé shows us in the opening vignette of this chapter, singers facilitate the overall flow and direction of a performance: they begin with a song which cues to the musicians the melodic and rhythmic accompaniment that they are expected to play. Dancers follow suit, listening for pauses in the singing and for a growing intensity in the music-making so that they can offer an improvised solo or a choreographed intervention.

Influence and leadership do not strictly remain in the hands of the singers; there can be a sort of “jockeying for position” that moves leadership among performers.

Although a singer may make the first call, once the song and rhythm are out there, it is in the hands of all of the artists working together, trading off moments in the spotlight (so to speak), to keep the song and rhythm flowing, or to bring them to a close. Stone (1982) observed in regionally and culturally proximate Kpelle performance traditions in southern Guinea and northern Sierra Leone that in performance dancers and drummers are constantly negotiating and brokering positions of power:

the people who interact in Kpelle music events do so in hierarchical, interdependent ways. Ideally, for every participant role a reciprocal counter-role exists... The master drummer works to create *sân* [(the multi-faceted, multi-valence workings of a performance see Stone p. 3-4)] against a continuous non-*san* [(i.e., linear and repetitive)] pattern of the *gbun-gbun* drum. The solo dancer is usually conceived as employing *san* against the more subordinate master drummer who tries to follow and reflect what the dancer chooses to execute. But some master drummers who are extremely skilled turn this relationship on end so that the dancer becomes subordinate (Stone 1982:81).

While Mande performance sociability works in similar ways, with singers, dancers, and musicians playing off of one another to dynamically lay claim to the “spotlight,” the power dynamics at play in any single performance are far more subtle than Stone suggests. In some ways, Mande performance sociability is collaborative, in that artists trade-off leadership as opposed to forcefully laying claim to it. Dédé’s role as emcee and as a singer put her in an overall leadership role in charting out and directing the flow and the arc of the performance however, she was throughout

the performance constantly releasing and returning to her position at its helm. Each time Dédé broke into a refrain, a bridge, or into a different song altogether, she drove the direction of the performance only to cede it once again to the musicians. The musicians in turn broke into the rhythms associated with the lyrics that Dédé sang, with lead drummers weaving their solo phrases in and out of the overall structuring rhythm played by accompanying drummers. Together, Dédé and the drummers engaged in a musical give-and-take until they mutually arrived at a place in the performance where they could musically, spatially, and aesthetically cede direction to the dancers. When the dancers emerged, the temporal and rhythmic elements of the performance, as well as the melodic accentuation, and even the vocalized interludes of “That’s good!” (*A nyana!*) or “Clap your hands!” (*Aw tégéré fô!*) by fellow performers and by animated audience members, were focused entirely on their offerings. When the dancers finished their interludes, the helm was then returned to the drummers or to Dédé, to once again take hold.

Successful performances don’t simply happen because collaborating performers have training or skills in their own area of expertise or because they are nice or polite to one another; indeed, aesthetically pleasing performances rely heavily on the broad performance knowledge that each artist brings into her or his intervention on stage. To have performance knowledge is to have training in and comprehension of the aesthetic components – fundamentally, song, music, and dance – that make up Mande performance. With this in mind, performance sociability therefore depends on artists developing with their fellow performers a

mutual understanding of one another's specific skills set as well as a knowledge-base of one another's performance discipline. In order for singers to work successfully with other singers, for example, they need to have a sense of and familiarity with their fellow singers' style of performance (do they, for instance, have a sound or a style of singing that is specific to a region, ethnic group, or to a particular class or caste? And what are the aesthetic particularities and peculiarities of that style?). Sociable singers should also have a broader knowledge of the rhythms meant to accompany the songs that they sing. They are also familiar with the dance vocabularies that dancers typically associate with the rhythms at play – this gives them a clear sense of when it would be aesthetically useful to interject on a dancer's intervention or when it is best to leave them to work their interventions through.

Similarly can be said for Mande musicians and dancers. In order for drummers to work collaboratively within an ensemble of drummers, for instance, they have to know the various interlocking patterns of each instrument and to have a sense of the overall musical composition with all musical voices and patterns at play. Drummers must also know what each drummer in an ensemble can and will effectively play in any given performance so as ensure that a presentation capitalizes on its players' strengths. As for sociability among musicians and dancers, in similar ways to Gerstin's observation that "African and diasporic musicians play music as movement, and dancers feel movement as music" (1998:121), I have found that the greatest performance collaborations happen among musicians and dancers

who approach their encounter as one in which the musical and choreographic patterns can be interwoven with minimal distinction between the pattern that is audible and the pattern that is visible. Although these artists have defined modes of performance, when they are brought together, the distinctions between them dissipate – patterns of sound and patterns of movement are enmeshed to create a unified “fabric” of performance (Chernoff 1979:47). Dancers must have a keen sense of timing, therefore, knowing when to dance in tandem with other dancers, when to let another dancer shine, or when to themselves take to center stage. Dancers must also have a strong grounding in the movement vocabulary and the aesthetic contours of the dances that they perform. To bring a dance from a region or ethnicity unrelated to the rhythms and songs at play is to display a lack of social knowledge and in some cases social respect for the heritage and performance traditions from whence the music and the movements hail.⁴¹ Indeed, a dancer’s ability to be sociable in performance depends heavily on her musical sensibilities or what I call her *musicality*.

Musicality

Mande dance training always begins with the feet. Whether its children mimicking celebrants of wedding festivities, African dance ensembles educating novice members, or professional Malian artists teaching workshops to Western dance-

⁴¹ There are, of course, highly skilled and respected performers who offer interventions that are creative *mélanges* across geographical and cultural regions. Their artistic “transgressions,” though recognized, are offset by their physical mastery and are at times thought quite innovative. I allude to the tensions between tradition and innovation, intellectual understanding and physical skill in a few pages when I explore the work of dancer/choreographer Ibrahim “Banjugu” Coulibaly.

tourists, the first efforts toward bringing dance knowledge into the body focus on foot placement. And not simply the mechanics and spatial orientation of placement, for even as the knees bend to draw the feet into a succession of stomps, or as the heels raise to draw the weight forward onto the balls of the feet, the timing, accentuation, and overall patterning of those stomps or shifts in weight must connect directly and immediately to the music. Over time, this connection settles deeply into dancers' bodies, establishing itself as a sensibility – a profoundly and acutely responsive sensorial capacity – that almost always comes into play when dancing.

A dance's basic footwork is rarely without musicality or relationship to sound: dancers, at times audibly, at times silently hum, sing, click their tongues, snap, clap, even tap-out the basic rhythm patterns associated with the dance in which they are engaged, building a rhythmic "scaffolding" to their movements. This is not simply a didactic exercise; humming or tapping out the musical rhythm alongside the dance coaxes out of dancing bodies a rhythmic "voice" ready to dialogue with the "voices" of other dancers and musicians that can, in turn, contribute to the overall cohesion of the rhythmic fabric being created. Dancers' rhythmic contributions are not necessarily overtly visible nor are they easily notated; they delineate and at times simply suggest the contours of a rhythm, highlighting the spaces in between articulated beats and sounded notes. Waterman (1952) calls this "metronome sense": a kinesthetic perception of regular beats by both dancers and musicians, "whether or not a given beat is actually expressed" in movement or sound (in

Gerstin 1998:122]).⁴² It is precisely this “metronomic” musicality that dancers of Mande dance hone, if tacitly, from the moment they first bring their bodies into the dance.

Consider Mamadou “Madou” Soumano’s improvised solo at a cultural educational exchange event in 2009 at the Yeredon Center for Malian Arts in Bamako [\[Clip 11\]](#). Listening closely to the voice of the *doundoun* drums as they articulate the central defining rhythm of the number, Madou jumps into the solo circle bringing into the mix his felt sense of a separate, though not unrelated, meter. While his footwork teases out a rhythm pattern that he weaves into the musical performance, a series of rhythmic flourishes move sequentially through his body – from his feet touching the floor, through his knees, hips, torso, and arms, right on up to the crown of his head. Watching closely, we can see Madou’s metronome sense brought, if for a moment, into relief. Lifting his right knee as he approaches the stutter step with his right foot, then mirroring the same knee-lift stutter step on his left side, he uses his body to carve a rhythm pattern into the cacophonous musical space – a pattern that is ultimately a silent, barely discernible allusion, but it nonetheless lends gravitas to the way the music and the dance are brought together into a performative whole.

⁴² I use this concept knowing that as an outgrowth of Herskovits’ “African retentions” (1990), “metronome sense” walks a fine line between reifying a capacity that is innate and static as opposed to a skill that is honed and mutable. As the essence of this chapter about performance sociability and Mande performance aesthetics suggests, along with its place within this larger project about the interplay of performance and social belonging, skillful dance and music-making grow out of engaged hard work and training as opposed to capacities and skills presumed inherited.



Clip 11: Musicality
 Mamadou "Madou" Soumano
 Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts
 Doumanzana, Bamako, Mali. August 2009.
 Footage and photo by Alexander Helsingier.
<http://youtu.be/EIUDSXJO3EA>

Madou's ability to seamlessly weave his musical presence into the performance was honed over years of dancing and professional development (with youth ensembles, as a dancer accompanist to Malian musical divas, teaching workshops and performing for foreign dance tourists, and offering improvised solos at community festivities). Without the music playing, Madou knows how to sing the core rhythms that delineate the musical contours of the performance – he can sing the voice of the *dundun* drums as he brings his own movements into the conversation; he can sing an improvised *jembe* pattern that accentuates a lifting knee, a sweeping arm, or a squat and jump combination. Without this degree of familiarity with the other "voices" in a performance, a dancer can only superficially engage in the performance dialogue that is under way – offering a self-concerned one-sided assertion, rather than a self-aware and socially-engaged exchange. Having a keen sense of the musical landscape of a performance, a dancer can smoothly integrate his movements into

the scene, seamlessly transition within it, and exit from it with ease. Observe the smoothness of Madou's transitions from one repeated movement phrase to the next: tempo remains steady as Madou and the musicians effortlessly carry-on their "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

Familiarity with the other "voices" in a performance is also an asset for masterful players of Mande music whose skillful encounters with dancers, in no small part, depend on their familiarity with the movement vocabularies that dancers set to the music that they play (whether or not the musicians themselves have the overt embodied skills to actually dance). If you listen closely to the musical accompaniment to Madou's improvised solo, you will notice how the lead *jembe* drum player uses a flourish, a slap or a base note to accentuate brief moments in Madou's intervention. Pay attention to how as Madou speeds up his intervention, the *doundoun* player responds by shortening the *doundoun* pattern so that he can keep his playing aligned with Madou's footwork. Here we witness a give-and-take among artists that echoes the contours of a discursive exchange – the jembe player's flourishes are sonic interjections (additional information or an affirmation) into Madou's statements; the doundoun player's changes in phrasing are his efforts to remain engaged with Madou's performed offering.

I follow my interlocutors' lead in using "dialogue" as a metaphor to describe on-stage engagements among performers. From several of my informants' points of view, a "sweet" performance depends, in large measure, on the artists' abilities and

willingness to give-and-take. When this dialogue works, dancers and musicians engage in an interchange of mutually intelligible and at times mutually re-enforcing statements, suggestions, and flourishes. The fact that dancers and musicians can make themselves understood, even though they are ultimately making assertions in distinctively different dialects (one kinetic, the other sonic), is attributed to the above-described familiarity that they have with one another's "language". But musicality among dancers (and "dancicality" among musicians) does not only contribute to the creation of aesthetically pleasing performances because it allows for dialogic exchange among performers, it also makes known the parameters of the vocabulary from which players can successfully draw in any single performance.

I watched as this lesson was made clear to a group of American dance students at a wedding in Bamako in 2008. They had come to Mali on a cultural education tour to the Yeredon Center for Malian Arts where they would "learn about [Malian] art, music, traditions, and culture directly from the source" (Yeredon Center website <http://www.yeredonmali.org/>, accessed on 09/16/14). To that end, they took "traditional" jembe dance and music classes every morning, and Malian hip-hop or Afro-contemporary dance classes every evening. On "wedding days" (Thursdays and Sundays in Bamako) they would attend celebrations, looking to observe and, for many, to participate in the dancing. At this one celebration, the American dance students were delighted to see how the dances and rhythms that they studied in the more controlled (and in many ways contrived) context of dance studios both in Mali and in the United States, had come to life in community celebration, where everyone

was familiar (both intellectually and physically) with the dances and songs being performed. They watched intently as the cycle of each rhythm played itself out: starting slowly with song, picking up the pace as a large circle of celebrants danced around in unison, eventually reaching an apex of speed where the large circle of dancers dissipated, making room for soloists to burst-in with creative combinations or feats of strength, speed, and flexibility.

Throughout this celebration, several members of the group of American students eagerly joined the larger circle of celebrants as they fell-into a single file line, to “coolly” shuffle through the foundational defining step of the rhythm.⁴³ Some of the more adventuresome and confident among them jumped in one at a time or in dyads to perform whole choreographed phrases as “solos”. Some of these solos landed on the rhythm – foreign bodies weaving their interpretations of Mande movement into the fabric of performance – others landed askew, throwing off-balance the flow of performance, forcing the drummers to shift the rhythm accordingly or to simply bring it to a graceful end. At one point in the celebration, one vivacious member of the American group came away from her solo exhilarated, but also a bit confused as to why it simply didn’t feel as “smooth” as it did when dancing the same steps that morning in dance class. I knew what she was describing: feeling awkward in a solo, not knowing why efforts to bring one’s dancing “voice” into the dialogue of

⁴³ African arts and performance aesthetics are often described in terms of the presence or absence of “heat”. Something that is “cool” is slow, relaxed, calm and seemingly detached while something that is “hot” is fast, energetic, and forcefully engaged. Robert Farris Thompson refers to this as “an aesthetic of the cool” (1973). I return to its role and formulation within Mande dance performance in a few pages.

performance felt so disjointed, so garbled, so misunderstood. I had learned, over time, that to really be a part of the performance, dancers need to listen to the rhythm, to hear its musical markers, to take note of its rhythmic allusions, and to in turn, recognize them as diacritica of the rhythm's regional and ethnic affiliations; to listen for what my interlocutors refer to as the "origins" or "families" of a rhythm. What felt awkward to this young American dance student was the fact that she was trying to bring two different "rhythm families" together – putting the movements from one family into the music of another, essentially creating an ill-fitting marriage.

In Mande performance, "rhythm families" are groupings of rhythms and their associated dances that hail from a specific Mande ethnic group and region. The rhythms, though distinct from one another, are often played in the same meter and have patterns that are easily reconciled with one another. Soloists who recognize the rhythm family at play in any given moment, can draw content and inspiration from the musical and movement vocabularies of other rhythms from within that family. Even though Mande performance is perceived and presented as a genre unified by broader linguistic, aesthetic, and social commonalities, there are nonetheless regional and ethnic specificities that parse Mande performance in important ways. Rhythm families encapsulate these specificities and are used as central organizing principles of Mande performance. Artists who understand this know how to create performances that speak to the aesthetic preferences of their audiences.

Returning to Bourdieu's (1986) suggestion that judgments of taste are intimately linked to social position; that, in fact, aesthetic preferences are themselves acts of social positioning, we see that Mande performers who are keenly aware of audience expectations and who embody them in their performance styles are themselves grappling with just such processes of social positioning. By recognizing and working within the parameters created by rhythm families, performers like Dédé and the dancers and musicians who accompany her, make aesthetic choices that are simultaneously influenced by socio-cultural expectations as well as by their own personal desires for professional and, by extension, social recognition. Here is where style and physical skill come in; for to give an audience exactly what it is expecting – i.e. to stick to the movements of a rhythm family without flair or creative diversion – is to perform in a way that is rote, stiff, non-descript, unmemorable. An effective performance, therefore, is one that creatively (i.e., with style) plays with the parameters laid out by the concept of rhythm families and by the expectations put forth by a discerning audience.

Style

“Sharon, your body is slight, you have to *fill the eyes of the spectators* with big movements,” Ibrahim “Banjugu” Coulibaly critiqued my dancing.⁴⁴ I was participating in a weeklong workshop in Quinzambougou, Banjugu's family's

⁴⁴ “Sharon, ton corps est fine. Il faut remplir les yeux des spectateurs en faisant des grandes mouvements” (1/11/2010). I heard this metaphor of “fullness” before - used by a West African dance instructor in Paris in 2008 who encouraged those of us in the dance workshop to “fill the movement” (“Il faut remplir le mouvement”). He was urging us to fully articulate our expression of the movements that he was teaching us.

neighborhood in Bamako. He had come back to Mali with several students from Belgium, where he was living, to offer them immersive performance training in the place where Banjugu came into himself as a dancer and where he developed his distinctive and celebrated style of performance. His tall and doughy physique accentuates his simultaneously vibrant and easeful choreography.

As a youngster Banjugu traveled back and forth the route between Bamako, Mali and Bobo, Burkina Faso, spending weeks and months studying the performance styles and vocabularies of dancers at village ceremonies along the way. Refining the repetitive village choreographies with inflections from his “street-dancing” forays into hip-hop and breakdancing (copying the moves he’d seen in American movies, and MTV music video imports), and from his brief stints with Bamako performance ensembles and at popular celebrations (like weddings), Banjugu has come to be known for the ways in which he plays along and artfully permeates the boundaries of rhythm families. Starting with the customary “foundational steps” (Fr: *les pas de base*) of a rhythm, he then brings in fresh combinations of his own creation. In so doing, he enmeshes in interesting ways a range of traditional rhythms, foundational steps and his own new ideas.

At the workshop in Quinzambougou, Banjugu offered a dance that he called “Ladji”. It was a mixture of the foundational steps from several dances customarily performed by members of the Mande artisan castes (Bk: *nyamankalaw*), on top of which he added pirouettes, petit pas, elongated phrases, abrupt transitions in rhythm, and

interesting resolutions of a beat intentionally dragged-out. Upon my invitation, my main dance instructor, M'ba Coulibaly (no direct relation to Banjugu), participated in the workshops with Banjugu. Together with Tchefuru, her *jembefola* (professional *jembe* drum player) husband, who came to observe the workshop, she declared this choreography a “mish-mash” (Bk: *nyagamina*). This was not meant as a critique, it was what they saw. M'ba further explained, “Banjugu’s dance is his and my dance is mine. I work to uphold more traditional approaches and interpretations of the dances. His dance is innovation.”⁴⁵

Typically, Mande dance choreographies consist of a set of steps or short combinations put into a specific order. Each step is repeated until the lead drummer plays a “break” or a “call” (which, in Bamanakan, the lead drummer is described as “cutting,” *a be tige*, “he is cutting” the rhythm) that then signals to the dancer to either move on to another step or combination, or to finish out their intervention. Banjugu sets his style apart from this more standard approach by creating innovative combinations or “chains” of movement (Fr: *enchaînements*) that are often asymmetrical (i.e., rarely including an equal number of repetitions on each side of the body; or beginning a step cycle on one foot and ending it on the opposite foot; etc...), and that plays with the rhythmic structure of the piece such that the choreography drags behind or runs ahead of the pulse, only to find resolution somewhere further along in the choreography.

⁴⁵ Personal communication, 1/06/09.

Banjugu links his coming of age as a dancer to the moment when his dancing made Dédé Kouyaté cry. After years of honing his dance “in the streets of Bamako – at weddings and at traditional ceremonies,” he found himself dancing the Khassonké dance *Dansa*, for the legendary Khassonké diva herself. He brought tears to her eyes with his gracefulness, she gave him a 10 000 CFA bill (about \$20) and told him that she loved his dancing because he was a man unafraid to “be in touch with his feminine side.”⁴⁶ Later that day, following the advice of a trusted friend, Banjugu put in his bathwater the money that “the great diva” gave him.⁴⁷ This would seal-in her benediction and ensure that his newfound success and recognition as a dancer would last. Dédé brought Banjugu under her wing, encouraging him to maintain the “feminine” in his dance. In some ways, Banjugu was offering to do the same for me: “Sharon, I have no hesitation giving feedback to dancers like you. I will push you...” and then he reminded me to “fill the spectators eyes”.

“Filling the spectator’s eyes with large movements,” encapsulates Mande performance style, where qualities of form are enmeshed with qualities of affect. To fill the spectator’s eyes is to capture her gaze, to appeal to her aesthetic sensibilities, her memories, and her socio-cultural loyalties with a performance that is at once recognizable and made new. Form speaks to the realm of the familiar: when the music begins, dancers assume a “get-down” posture, “a deeply inflected, virtually crouching position” (Thompson 1974:13) – much akin to the forms a body takes in

⁴⁶ “*De toucher son côté féminin*” (1/11/2009).

⁴⁷ “*La grande vedette*” (1/11/2009).

daily work, or in crouching around a shared bowl of rice and sauce. Thompson suggests that the “get down encloses a dual expression of salutation and devotion” – a refined yet humble sociality (1974:14). Banjugu would return to the importance of posture and weight bearing, exemplifying his words with action. Bending the knees, leaning the torso forward, bouncing on the balls of the toes, he explained, “We bend forward, we release everything,” “there is no weight on the heels.”⁴⁸ This notable aesthetic quality plays a technical role as well: it allows for stable downwardly-rooted steps to easily and immediately give way to airy jumps, after which it facilitates the body’s soft return to the earth (avoiding a joint-jarring “thud”) so that the dancer can carry-on dancing. Groundedness and airiness co-exist in what Gottschild refers to as “high affect juxtaposition”; an aesthetic quality and mode of Africanist performance that embraces aesthetic and affective opposites – “cool” and “hot”, high and low, balance and instability (Gotschild 2001:333–334). The aesthetic principles of a Mande representation – in performance, in visual arts – emerge from the effort to integrate highly contrasting textures: a closeness to the earth that in every moment alludes to the ease of taking flight. The form of the “get-down,” can on a dime generate a feeling of surprise as the dancer jumps, spins, kicks, or swiftly ends her intervention. Affective responses come in those moments when the unexpected interjects in the familiar.

⁴⁸ “*On hanche en avant, on relâche tout.*” “*Il n’y a pas de poids sur les chevilles*” (1/11/2009).



Banjugu in the “get-down” position.



The “get-down” position facilitates lateral movements and readies the body for quick transitions.



From low to high.

**Figure 11: Ibrahim “Banjugu” Coulibaly Dance Workshop
Quinzambougou, Mali. January 2009.
Photo by the author.**

The entanglements of form and affect are not only detected in the physical postures of Mande dancers, they are also highly present in somatic action. Repetition by way of recurring movement phrases plays against the threat of redundancy. Bodies

repeating actions appeal to human desires to stay close to the familiar, while strategic change in those actions appeal to inclinations toward newness or the unexpected. Repeated dance steps are a kind of “holding pattern” (Thompson 1974:14) that at a moment tacitly agreed upon by dancers and musicians give way to another pattern or to an improvised phrase. Performance sociability reinserts itself here, for without musicians who attune their playing to the dancers, what we see are dancing bodies stuck in a holding pattern that never ends - physically and aesthetically tiring everyone out (dancers, musicians and audience members alike).

I once danced a version of *Dansa* with a Malian-American dance ensemble. Set for a proscenium stage, the choreography had all twelve dancers moving in snaking lines across the space. The lead drummer was a Malian *jembe* player who touted himself a master unmatched in style, depth of knowledge, and experience. As if concerned that the audience wouldn’t see him past us dancers (all six-plus feet, two-hundred pounds of him) or that they would miss him projecting forth the thunderous claps and rumbles of his instrument, he obsessively flitted his hands about and watched the audience for hints of direct recognition. He had forgotten about us. And halfway through the choreography, he launched into an endless and complex solo phrase leaving us to infinitely repeat the choreography’s flashy low-to-high pirouette combination. Tiring, wilting, breathless we waited for him to play the break until finally someone gasped out “*Jembefola! Ka tige! Ka tige!*” “Play the break, already!” The thrill of repetition, of experiencing the familiar in new ways with each iteration,

is tamped-out when that which is repeated and those who are doing the repeating begin to tire.

As with improvisation in Jazz, style in Mande performance places great weight on the ability of performers to strike a balance between repetition and variation (c.f. Berliner 1994:196). Nowhere is this more apparent than in a Mande dancer's ability to improvise. Moving from the base step into a danced solo gives Mande performers the space to create "informed variations on well-internalized patterns" (Gerstin 1998:134) and the means to celebrate "individual prowess in the context of collective, communal identity" (Gottschild 2003:177). Speaking of Cretan artisans' treatment of religious art, Herzfeld (2004) suggests that style and skill grow not out of an artist's capacity to "break the mould," so to speak, but rather out of an artist's capacity to make work that is an "embellishment on a stable reproduction" (38-39). Similarly holds true for Mande dance improvisers whose interventions are guided by knowing when to perform traditional material (like base steps) and when to extemporize upon it. Skillfully inserting variation into repetition once again highlights how qualities of form appeal to a sense of the familiar (i.e., repetition), and how affective qualities appeal to the desire for something unexpected (i.e., variation).

Consider Ibrahim Sidibé's intervention at a wedding celebration in the Sabalibougou market in Bamako [\[Clip 12\]](#). In a deep get-down posture, he pivots around his left foot, lifting and dropping his heel as he goes. Around his ankles he wears rattles

made of the dried shells of kola nuts. They enhance his stutter steps with a hissing vamp as he circles round. He brings in a variation, reaching for an invisible object in the air, passing it from one hand to the next and throwing it under his leg. He then starts in on a short repeated left-to-right side stepping pattern that he uses as a bridge to his final crescendo: a pelvis thrusting repetition that draws his fellow performers and a wedding celebrant to spontaneously join in. Listen to the crowd's reaction: heightened applause, rising cries of "eh-ehhhhhh!" and laughter. Ibrahim inflects variation into his repetition such that the form of his dance engenders affective responses.



Clip 12: Repetition and Variation
Ibrahim Sidibé, Sabalibougou, Mali, December 2009
Photo by the author.
http://youtu.be/zEb_bblHoFI

Moving from stylistic qualities of form that include the “get-down” posture and repetition without redundancy, we come to the stylistic quality of precision in movement and of the exactitude by which dancers repeat and reproduce choreography. Whether dancing a pre-planned performance piece set for stage or whether joining groups of celebrants dancing around a celebration grounds,

precision in Mande movement is fluid, approximate. Working through the base steps of a rhythm, celebrants and professional dancers alike move together and yet a closer look reveals that *synchronized movement is an allusion rather than a concrete action*.

In July 2007 I traveled with a group of American dance and music students to a village called Dialakoroba in the Kolondieba district of the Sikasso region of southern Mali. We were greeted with music, song and dance from the moment our vans pulled up to the gates of the village. Members of the Mande hunter's society greeted us first. Protectors of villagers, guardians of its perimeter, these men came out in full regalia – mud cloth outfits made heavy with dangling mirrors, cowrie shells, protective amulets, and trophies of the hunt. Stepping through the village gates, the melodic vamp of the hunter's lute (Bk: *donso n'goni*) guided us to the village celebration grounds. There, the village women's sisterhood took over, lining a path toward the village elder's house. Calabash shakers in hand, they sang songs and nudged us along. The local drum and dance troupe led us the rest of the way. The lead drummer, Zou flashed a mustachioed smile that echoed the image on his tattered tee-shirt of Dennis Hopper sitting back on his Harley-Davidson in the 1969 classic film *Easy Rider*. On a big cylindrical *doundoun* drum strapped to his chest, Zou beat out *Dídadí*, the regional rhythm, as dancers offered improvised interpretations of *Dídadí*'s stuttering base step. Once formal greetings and offerings were made, we returned to the village celebration grounds where the hunter's, the village singers, and the local drum and dance ensemble played into the night.



**Figure 12: Zoumana – *Dídadí* drummer
Dialakoroba, Mali. September 2007.
Photo by the author.**

As villagers danced the *Dídadí* base-step in single file concentric circles, I was struck by how such a vast group of people (one hundred or more) could move in utter unison, keeping time with the rhythm that Zou and his associates continuously played. Looking down at the feet, I was astonished to find that in spite of the synchronized feel or groove projected by the dancing villagers, they were neither all doing exactly the same thing, nor were they placing their steps squarely on the beat [\[Clip 13\]](#).



Clip 13: Spectrum of Precision
Dialakoroba, Kolondieba District, Sikasso, Mali. August 2007.
 Footage and photo by the author.
<http://youtu.be/6dcEJxcR3U>

Precision in Mande performance is thus comprised of a set of actions that groove together within a *spectrum of precision* rather than along a linear and exacting choreography. Mande dance that is “sweet” is therefore imbued with what Jazz musicians might call “swing”. Berliner explains that swing is an aesthetic quality in Jazz that is created by artists who imbue the rhythmic feel of their music with “qualities of syncopation and forward motion” (1994:244). Jazz musicians whose style of playing is too rhythmically calculated, too exacting, too mechanical have no swing; it’s the “rhythmic flow” and the “controlled fluctuations” that make a piece really groove, really swing (245). Approximate precision dictates the form of a dancer’s movements, all the while fostering a feeling of flow, of momentum that makes viewers want to get up and dance themselves, here, again we see how form and affect are enmeshed in Mande dance practice.

Intensity is necessary to creating the feeling of momentum that draws an audience to cut across the line that distinguishes spectator from dancer. Banjugu’s suggestion

to “fill the spectator’s eyes with big movements” was not simply a comment on form with a mind toward building in me a clearer sense of Mande dance style, but was also a reference to the importance of bringing intensity to that form, for intensity is what moves audience members to respond – to feel something, to clap, to cheer, to “spray” performers with money or gifts, or to get up and dance themselves. During that five-day workshop, Banjugu found my performance too restrained and so encouraged me not to hold back. My efforts to perform an “aesthetic of the cool” (Thompson 1973) – to articulate my movements with a relaxed yet engaged body, without making the dance seem rushed or like it was drawing too much effort – caused me to play my movements too close to my body and unintentionally tamping-down the vibrancy of my performance.

Gottschild (2001) speaks to the fine line between coolness and apathy. Expanding on Thompson (1973), she suggests that coolness is an attitude of “composure and vitality” wherein the body articulates danced movements that are robust but where the face evokes composure; “the mask of the cool”. Coolness in Africanist styles, Gottschild further asserts, evokes something quite different than the detached aloofness (the “sangfroid”) of European styles of dance: “The European attitude suggests centeredness, control, linearity, directness; the Africanist mode suggests asymmetricality (that plays with falling off center), looseness (implying flexibility and vitality), and indirectness of approach. ‘Hot,’ it’s opposite, is a necessary component of the Africanist ‘cool’”(2001:335–336). In the context of popular music in Bamako, Skinner (2009) highlights how a performance that is both “touching”

and “penetrating” is one that has a musical groove that is on fire - “loud, fast-paced, intense and exciting” – and that is balanced out with elements that are “ ‘cool,’ quiet, slowed-down and subdued” (189). Similarly holds true for Malian dance, in that the cool, slowly repeating “foundational steps” ground the fiery danced interjections - the fast, powerful, and quite often acrobatic material of skilled (or inspired) dancers. A kind of cyclical and temporal progression is revealed: as the performance unfolds, the music and the movement groove together from cool to hot to cool again. The aesthetic of the cool is the coexistence of hot and cool: where (as Banjugu intimated) in Mande dance the performer’s body is relaxed even as her movements are big enough to “fill the eyes of the spectator”.

This chapter attests to the time worn notion that there is always something to be learned from mistakes. What could have been a failed ethnographic encounter, in the end, became something valuable: my misstep at the wedding facilitated by the revered *jelimuso*, Dédé Kouyaté, crystallized the tacit understanding that the capacity for performers to behave sociably on stage makes for a “sweet” performance. It also paved the way for “performance sociability” as a concept to illuminate how a performer’s musicality and performance style factor-in to the strategies by which she enacts a dance and for whom. Whether it is a honed familiarity with the voices of accompanying instruments, or a thorough understanding of the socio-cultural, historical and geographical situatedness of the rhythm and dance being performed; whether it is the capacity to balance contrasting stylistic and affective qualities (high-low, fast-slow, repetition-variation,

hot-cool...), or the skill of knowing how and when to play with precision and innovation, the fact remains that all of these competencies are brought together so as to offer a performance that is aesthetically, and by extension, socially pleasing for performers and spectators alike.

It is important to point out, however, that although my own personal and professional reasons for accepting the invitation to accompany Dédé paid off, Dédé's personal and professional interests (which, as we will see in the next chapter, extend to her family as well) were also at stake in my participation. Indeed, I was invited to join in the celebration because having a skilled and knowledgeable foreign dancer accompany the performers has the potential to “up the ante” and enhance the accolades and pay-off that Dédé would ultimately receive.

Clearly, Dédé (or, most likely her son, Siriman, who called to invite me) had thought this through. I was a friend of and ostensibly an “understudy” to Dédé's grandson (Siriman's son) *jelidundun* player, Dramane Sissoko and his dancer spouse, Manu. Over a course of several months in Bamako, I joined Dramane and Manu at countless celebrations all over the city. Dramane, much like his cousin Seyba, would play the *jelidundun*, and Manu, a white French woman, would dance.

A professional dancer in France, Manu spent years traveling between Europe and Mali to study Mande dance. She learned traditional “village” styles in the Keyes region of Mali under the supervision of Dédé and studied contemporary

cosmopolitan styles as an apprentice and then as a member of the celebrated *Troupe Artistique et Culturelle du District de Bamako* under the direction of Ba Issa “Baisa” Diallo. Manu is known around Bamako as a foreigner with remarkable skill and with notable understanding and knowledge of Mande dance. I have seen women cry the tears of longing for “home” when Manu offered the slow, subtle dance movements of a village girl. I have seen wedding celebrants throw bundles of expensive cloth, wads of CFA and endless accolades at Manu for her physically masterful, and deeply culturally informed improvisations at popular celebrations. I learned a lot by watching and dancing with Manu and she took me under her wing, showing me how a foreign woman (Bk: *toubabumuso*), can earnestly and sociably participate in popular celebrations.

An important turning point in my relationship to Dramane and Manu’s family, of which Dédé is the matriarch, happened in July 2009 when Dramane and Manu invited me to perform *Sandiya*, the dance of the *jeliw*, in accompaniment to Dédé and her daughter Oumou as they sang. The event was a *Grand Sumu*, a night of *jeliya*, performed by the biggest *jeli* singers in Bamako at the *Palais des Congress*, the most luxe and prestigious performance venue in Bamako. Manu instructed me to have my hair braided. She gave me to wear a lovely sky blue tunic with delicate embroidery at the collar and moments before we stepped on stage, she offered me a small beaded necklace and a bit of rouge for my lips and cheeks. Before an audience of hundreds of impeccably dressed and bejeweled women, we eagerly danced the spiraling dance of Mande *jeliw*. At the event, I learned that it was sponsored by

Africable, a West African television network with viewership reaching across the continent and into West African households around the world.⁴⁹ The event was televised countless times throughout my yearlong stay in Mali and I came to be recognized as one of Dédé's foreign dancers, praised for my rendition of this important dance, especially in accompaniment to such a celebrated singer.



**Figure 13: The author with Manu Sissoko (right).
Grand Sumu Africable, Bamako, Mali. July 2009.
Photo by Alexander Helsinger.**

Clearly, there were several strategic interests resting on my presence and my sociability at the Baco-Djicoroni wedding that November in 2009. From the wads of cash, the rolls of damask fabric, the bottles of perfume, and the excited responses offered to Dédé, the musicians, and to my fellow dancers that day, I would venture to say that each of us (singers, musicians, dancers and ethnographer, too), in one way or another, benefitted. The question that follows is: what are the social implications of just such benefits?

⁴⁹ In celebration of the 5th anniversary of its founding.

CHAPTER THREE

Performative Bodies Dancing Social Position

“Personhood and collectivity are dialectically related; one achieves its fullness and agency through the other in mutually reinforcing and sustaining relations.”

-- Biodun Jeyifo (2014)

“We discover people by their dance.” Siriman Sissoko, Malian *jeli* and arts ambassador, once explained the role of dance in Mande society: “I know who you are, you know who I am without saying anything”.⁵⁰ Witnessing people jump-in to a celebration circle to dance when a song or a rhythm associated with their family heritage was played, made clear just what Sissoko meant. I was attending the wedding celebration of the son of Madou Kanté, a well-known Bamako dancer and musician. Throughout the intensely energetic fête, Kanté sat quietly on the sidelines with other “elders” of the dance and music community of Bamako. He watched with what seemed like aloof detachment as his young drummer protégés played in their vigorous (bordering on frenetic) style. Dancers strained to keep up. At a certain moment, there was a dramatic down shift in tempo. The celebration space grew quiet as someone at the microphone came in with a song about the fortitude and solidness of the elephant, the “totem” animal of the Mande blacksmith: “*A ye sama fô...*” “*About the elephant it was once said...*” Up stood Kanté. With bold steps, he entered the celebration circle and preened as he held aloft a short-handled hoe. He circumambulated as, one after another, songs about the occult power and

⁵⁰ “On se découvre les gens par leur danse,” “Moi je sais qui tu es, toi tu sais qui suis-je sans rien dire,” Siriman Sissoko, personal interview, Bamako, Mali, January 21, 2010.

knowledge of Mande blacksmiths filled the space. He smiled proudly. In that moment, my puzzlements about Kanté were brought to the fore: could his standoffishness, and his days spent drinking tea and playing music surrounded by rusty bits of iron in an abandoned rail yard be rooted in his performance of blacksmith heritage; of his “blacksmith-ness” (Bk: *numuya*)?

This was the first time I had seen *Numudon* or *Numufoli*, the dance or music of Mande blacksmiths, actually played in a ceremonial setting. Up until this point, I had encountered the dance in Malian dance classes and performances in the United States as well as in rehearsals and performances of the premier dance ensemble of Bamako, *La Troupe du District de Bamako*. In the vernacular performance context of a wedding ceremony or celebration, the blacksmiths present (in the above case, Kanté, later joined by some of his family members) stand, dance, and make themselves known. In arts performance contexts, one need not have filial or ethnic ties to Mande smithing (or even to the Mande world) in order to perform and represent the illusive and revered power associated with this alluring though dangerous social category.⁵¹

What are the implications of Sissoko’s lesson about how dance reveals a person’s selfhood when a specific dance (or rhythm or song) is performed in vastly different contexts, by people of a wide variety of socio-cultural backgrounds? Does the dance become an ineffectual tool of representation? Are the revelatory waters of social

⁵¹ See McNaughton 1988.

belonging muddled? Or do socially and culturally specific dances become useful in new ways to those who dance and to those watching?

In this chapter, I will explore these questions in an effort to champion a new perspective on the interplay of vernacular and arts performance: one that looks at dance as an enactment and a space of social renegotiation, a type of “performative performance,” in which both the act of dancing and the dance itself serves to redefine social position and the social capital associated with it. If, in the Austinian sense, a “performative” characterizes the efficaciousness of an utterance (i.e., how saying is doing) (1975) then a “performative performance” characterizes not only that which is manifested when speaking, but also that which is accomplished with an embodied action like dancing. More specifically, in the context of this project on Malian dance, a performative performance speaks to the ways in which dance is efficacious not simply as entertainment, but also as a *socially constitutive act*, an act that enables actors to both redefine and lay claim to social belonging in Mande society. In order to consider Malian dance as a space of performative performance however, we must first gain an understanding of Mande social organization and social performance because they are the grounds on which acts of social renegotiation take place. From there, we can move on to explore how vernacular and arts performances are interconnected and to survey the role that this interconnection plays in what I call *power dynamics and the dynamism of power* - how social capital is ascribed and how through kinetic arts performances (like dance) it is actively claimed in emergent and situational ways. Finally, with an

understanding of how Malian dancers through their dance actively engage and lay claim to social capital, we can consider some of the ethical and moral factors motivating Malian dancers to performatively perform dance in the ways that they do.

Before I go any further, I think it important to point out that this chapter goes deeply into the social machinations and related intricacies of Mande language and philosophy. The chapter can therefore be dense in places and so it calls upon readers to allow some of the details to wash over them in favor of the broader message. The main point, in the midst of the regionally specific details, is how arts and social performances are entwined and how Mande dance and dancers might exemplify this fact.

Mande Social Organization and Performance

Siya & Fasiya: Performing Ethnicity, Birthright, and Cultural Patrimony

Mali is a country known for its cultural and ethnic diversity and since the mid-20th century has successfully represented this diversity through dance, theatre and music on international performance stages (see Introduction).⁵² It is the historic heartland of the Mande world, where in the 13th century, the legendary Sunjata

⁵² Until the coup d'état on March 22, 2012, a common trope among Malians was that Mali was a special place because people enjoyed peaceful co-existence in spite of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic differences. In fact, it has often been suggested that the unique social institution of *sununkunya*, joking "cousin" relationships, in the Mande world has served as an essential tool in manifesting this non-antagonistic co-existence. *Sununkunya* is a discursive "pressure-release valve" whereby ethnic and cultural tensions are dissipated and alliances formed by quick witted insults told by one clan or ethnic group about the one to which it has come to be historically connected (see McNaughton 1988; Whitehouse 2012). I will return to *sununkunya* in a moment.

Keita, overcame adversity to build West Africa's largest empire, the Empire of Mali.⁵³ West Africans of Mande heritage often refer to this epic story when recounting their cultural and social origins, for the Emperor Sunjata is credited with conquering Sumanguru Kanté, the menacing King of the Soso, and subsequently organizing Mande social life into its current order (Bird and Kendall 1980:32).

Mande social order is organized around two important and highly intertwined concepts: ethnicity (Bk: *siya*) and birthright or paternal heritage (Bk: *fasiya*), which determine rules of social comportment, profession and marriage. They share etymological roots where *si* meaning "seed or grain" is followed by the suffix *ya* meaning "being something".⁵⁴ *Siya* thus implies a person's source of life, and with the addition of *fa* or "father," *fasiya* highlights the paternal origins of a person's source of life, and is similarly conceived in French as *patrimoine* (*patri* in reference to father).

Interestingly, although recognized as distinct principles, *siya* and *fasiya* are often used in the Mande world and by Mande studies scholars in conflicting or even interchangeable ways. Francophone Language and Literature professor, Cheick M. Chérif Keita (who is Malian himself) suggests that while *siya* means "race" or "ethnicity" and *fasiya* means "family heritage or family occupation," there are times

⁵³ For more on Mande geographical and cultural distinctions see Charry 2000.

⁵⁴ It is akin to the English suffix "-ness," "-ity," or "-hood," as in "sweetness," "nobility" or "personhood". In Mandekan, for example, *hòrònya* is "nobility," where *hòròn* is "noble" and *ya* is the suffix implying a state of being. Chérif Keita, personal communication 03/20/13.

when the two terms are used synonymously. Keita notes however, that *fasiya* is generally understood as somewhat more “restrictive” in that it specifies patrilineal socio-cultural heritage.⁵⁵ In his biography of world music pop icon Salif Keita, Cheick M. Chérif Keita (2009; 2011) uses *fasiya* to address the ways in which Salif Keita’s chosen life path as a musician was out of step with his noble (*hòròn*) patrilineal heritage and with the moral obligation he had of ensuring that *hòròn* collective heritage is passed on.⁵⁶

In her study of Mande bardism (Bk: *jeliya*) Barbara Hoffman (2000) uses *siya* (ethnicity) rather than *fasiya* (patrilineage) to ask similar questions about the contours of inherited Mande social categories however, following how her informants use of the term, she focuses less on paternal heritage and more on how *siya* distinguishes groups of people from one another, unifying them in what Fredrik Barth (1996) refers to as “shared cultural difference”. In this way, *siya* is about maintaining a sense of collectivity focused less on the moral imperative of preserving and passing on collective heritage than on setting groups of people apart: Africans from non-Africans, Mande people from non-Mande people, and griots or bards (Bk: *jeliw*) from nobility or freeborn people (Bk: *hórónw*) (Hoffman 2000:23).

Although in each of their projects, Keita and Hoffman reflect upon the importance of Mande social categories determined by patrilineal heritage, each scholar refers to

⁵⁵ Personal communication 03/20/13.

⁵⁶ The obligation and expectation that each individual protect and pass on her or his collective heritage is central to the concept of *fasiya* and to Mande morality. See Skinner 2009.

the phenomenon in terms that arguably highlight a difference between filial history and collective history. Keita's use of patrilineage (Bk: *fasiya*) in lieu of ethnicity (Bk: *siya*) places a finer (filial) point on the issue since world music icon, Salif Keita's choice to pursue music (generally within the purview of griot (Bk: *jeli*) undertakings) rather than farming or community leadership, was distinct from the professional choices of his own father and grandfather. Hoffman uses ethnicity (Bk: *siya*) in reference to a larger community (collective) of people (bards, *jeliw*) whose social positions are defined by a professional history shared over the *long durée*. Nevertheless, both scholars ultimately recognize the dynamic nature of "family identity" (Keita 2011:19) and the fact that Mande terms used to refer to social categories cannot be pinned down or encapsulated in language for as Hoffman suggests, "[p]ast knowledge and present understanding are inextricably linked in recursive relationships from which semantic meaning is constructed in the context of present use" (2000:21).⁵⁷

This "recursive construction" manifests in how established understandings of Mande social organization are dynamically entwined with vernacular arts and performance. In the Mande world, ethnic, cultural, and filial origins are "ideologically prescribed" (Hoffman 2000:11) and essential to determining social belonging; how people behave, whom they marry, and what sorts of professions they are expected to undertake, establish the types of claims they can make to social influence and power and how these claims are performed. In speaking about

⁵⁷ Keita argues that although the essential purpose of *fasiya* is to maintain "a certain level of stability in the structure of society, it is neither static nor immutable" (2011:20).

performance, I draw from Taylor (2003), Roach (1996), Butler (1990; 2006), Connerton (1989), Schechner and Turner (1985), Austin (1975), and Goffman (1973; 1990) to formulate an understanding of “performance” that refers to the mechanism by which knowledge, memory, and social belonging is transmitted through *embodied* actions, behaviors, and utterances. This understanding of performance is an attempt to address the “logocentric” (Taylor 2003) tendency to privilege discursive acts over embodied ones. While Austin’s “performative” (1975) suggests that an utterance in itself carries the gravitas and efficacy of a physical action, and Butler’s “performativity” (1990) points to the subtle ways in which people are socialized through repeated “regulating and citational practices” (Taylor 2003:5), my approach is an effort to recognize the ways in which *both embodied and* discursive performances are implicated in “power dynamics” and the “dynamism of power”. This is in line with Taylor’s “performatic” model in so far as it highlights how the nondiscursive realm of performance - the performatic, digital, and visual fields - are “always embroiled with the discursive one” (2003:6). Power dynamics and the dynamism of power stands apart from Taylor’s model however, in that it works with the fact that discursive and non-discursive realms are not as separate or separable as Taylor seems to suggest. A more useful distinction, I argue, is between the types of performances when and wherein ascribed social influence is enacted (power dynamics) and the situational ways in which social influence is actively claimed, regardless of ascribed status (dynamism of power). As will soon be made clear, performances that take place in everyday social encounters (like joking with a family friend on the street or in the market) I call “social performances,” and those

that manifest in the context of arts events (like dancing at a dance ensemble rehearsal or public presentation) I call “arts performances”. My understanding of the distinctions between these types of performance is informed by Cowan’s exploration of how dance-events are “framed,” or “conceptually set-apart from the activities of everyday life” (1990:19).⁵⁸ These frames are “fragile,” for Cowan has found that the dance-event in Greece is not simply a place where dance occurs it is, rather, an “ambiguous locus of social action” where discourse about dance also often includes discourse of everyday life. Similarly holds true for the Mande case in which some of the most exciting and fascinating social encounters happen when the frame or the line that divides social and arts performances break down, (like when exchanging a joke with a family friend manifests via an utterance, theatrical antics, or via a dance at a wedding celebration). Siriman Sissoko’s above mentioned suggestion that we “discover a person by her or his dance” is a distinctively Mande point of view on an aspect of the interconnectedness of Mande performance and everyday life because arts performance (which includes music, theatre and dance) offers Mande people crucial connections to their past that help them to define who they are and how they belong.⁵⁹ Taking the time to address the distinctions between

⁵⁸ Stone argues that Kpelle communities consider *pêle* or, music events, similarly: as bounded spheres of socio-cultural interactions “distinct from everyday life” (1982:2).

⁵⁹ Bamako-based music producer Paul Chandler, in response to the quieting of Malian music by the post-coup interim government, explains: “The way music functions in Mali is to empower people by reminding them who they are and where they come from. You eliminate that, and it becomes easier to control them.” In: “Mali’s Legendary Musicians Struggle to be Heard,” Aryn Baker, Time Magazine, <http://world.time.com/2013/05/08/the-day-the-music-died-malis-musicians-still-struggle-to-be-heard/#ixzz2TSyR34cn>. Accessed June 18, 2013.

social and arts performance contexts however, will allow for greater clarity in seeing how they intersect. Furthermore, in order to approach an understanding of how the intersections of social and arts performance play out in power dynamics and the dynamism of power in the Mande world, it is important to first gain a sense of Mande social organization and how it serves as the grounds on which power is negotiated, distributed and performed.

Mande Caste and Class

Mande social categories are “socio-professional differentiations” (Keita 2011:20)(Keita 2011: 20) comprised of three broad social categories: *hòròn*, *nyamankala* and *jon/woloso*. *Hòròn*, “nobility” or free born people made up of clans whose lineages that can be traced back to 13th century regional rulers whom Sunjata united under his single imperial banner.⁶⁰ They are imperial leaders, men of letters, merchant traders or landed farmers who trade their goods or harvest to the *nyamankala* artisans in exchange for crafted wares and social services.⁶¹

Nyamankalaw are professional artists and artisans with distinctive sub-groups including: *jeli*, griot, bard or oral historian; *numu*, blacksmith; *garanké*,

⁶⁰ Hoffman (2000) notes that translating *hòròn* as “noble” can be problematic in that it is offered without a corresponding “commoner” class and that it suggests freedom at birth, but without addressing the freedom into which non-slave classes are born. She therefore suggests “independent” person as a translation since *hòrònya* was the Bamana term Malians used to describe their independence from France in September 1960. Hoffman rightly points out, however, that “*hòròn* are far from independent from the rest of society, and are particularly dependent upon griots [sic.] in a number of ways” (2000:266, n.4).

⁶¹ See N’Diaye (1995) for a good description of class distinctions within *hòròn*.

leatherworker; and *funé*, Islamic praise-poets.⁶² Etymologically, *nyamankala* implies the capacity and skill to manage or wield the *kala* “handle of a tool, twig, stick” of the *nyama* or “vital force” or “natural force” in an object or substance (Bird, Kendall, and Tera 1995). While blacksmiths and leatherworkers have the alchemical knowledge for harnessing and transforming the vital force (Bk: *nyama*) of unearthed metals and minerals or of animals to offer tangible goods such as farming tools and pottery, clothes and shoes, griots (Bk: *jeliw*) and leatherworkers (Bk: *funéw*) have the knowledge of harnessing and transforming vital force using words, utterances, and musical sounds thus offering oration, conflict resolution, contract negotiation, public representation, music, dance and ceremony facilitation (see Austen 1999, Conrad and Frank 1995, McNaughton 1988, and Hoffman 2000).⁶³

Jonw and *wolosow*, are slaves, war captives, or house-born servants given in repayment of debt.⁶⁴ They are no longer active social categories in Mande societies

⁶² There is inconsistency among scholars and my Mande informants as to what social classes are included in *nyamankala*. Some include *funé*, others do not, while others still may include artisan groups such as basket makers, and wood carvers among other crafts specialists (Bird, Kendall and Tera in Conrad and Frank 1995: 30-31; Hoffman 2000: 10). All agree, however, that *jeli*, *numu*, and *garanké* are undoubtedly members of *nyamankala* social class.

⁶³ Malian cultural historian Sekou Camara suggested that because they are *nyamankala*, blacksmiths and leatherworkers also have the proxy duty and power of public oration when *jeliw* or *funéw* are not present (Personal communication, January 2010). In Bamanakan and Mandekan the “w” at the end of a noun connotes the plural.

⁶⁴ Sekou Camara explained that *jonw/wolosow* sometimes include themselves in the *nyamankala* formulation because “*jonw* and *wolosow* know a lot about the *hòròn* family to which they are attached and therefore they hold much over them” (Personal Communication: 12/26/2009). By this, Camara is suggesting, as numerous Mande scholars have (see Conrad and Frank 1995; Hale 1999; Austen 1999; and Hoffman, 2000), that the *hòròn-nyamankala* relationship is defined by the ever-shifting power dynamics between the social classes.

in so far as members of this class do not act as indentured servants (N'Diayé 1995:35). The social category endures nonetheless, in reference to the historical circumstances that established a connection between families.⁶⁵ Today, in return for compensation in the form of food, clothes, and money, *jonw* and *wolosow* perform services for their patron families during celebrations such as weddings, baptisms, or funerals. Their work might include preparing bodies for funeral rites, slaughtering animals for festive meals, cooking festive meals, dancing, singing, and praise singing. Although much of what they do is similar to the work of the artisan castes (*nyamankalaw*), it is distinct in so far as their performances and comportment in celebration are not governed by Mande expectations of modest behavior.⁶⁶ In fact, in ceremony and celebration, *jonw* and *wolosow* performances tend to be irreverent and in many cases bawdy.

This context explained the erratic and disruptive behavior of a woman at an elaborate wedding celebration I attended in Bamako in December 2009. The

⁶⁵ It is important to note, however, that in the Mande world, systems of servitude in repayment for family debts do continue to exist. It is debatable as to whether or not such systems are akin to enslavement, even as Malians of Mande heritage claim that it is not. Moreover, in northern Tuareg-controlled parts of Mali, slavery is still very much an active system of labor exploitation. Since the coup d'état in March 2012, a great deal of attention has been drawn to Tuareg agitations in the name of secession and the establishment of an independent Tuareg state, as well as to accusations of human rights violations by Tuareg populations engaged in human trafficking and enslavement of black sub-Saharan Africans. For more see Hicks "Families in Mali Splintered by Slavery as Culture and Conflict Converge" <http://www.guardian.co.uk/global-development/2013/apr/03/families-mali-slavery-culture-conflict>.

⁶⁶ Hoffman offers an evocative scene that highlights the various stereotypical ways of behaving according to one's social status. The scene is one in which a *jelimuso* friend of hers at a *denkundi* or baptism code switches between the quiet, sullen, still behavior typical and expected of *hòròn* and the flamboyant, theatrical, loud praise singing expected of her as a *jeli* (2000:246-247).

woman's attire and demeanor stood out. She wore a large red and white gingham collared shirt over a faded and mismatched wax print skirt and blouse. On the back of the shirt there was the phrase "*de l'eau fraîche*," cold water (Figure 14). Her hair was wrapped messily, and she wore standard issue flip-flop shoes and no jewelry. She traipsed around the celebration circle in haphazard ways, tossing dripping bags of water (free of charge) in people's laps hollering "*Ji suma! Ji suma!*" "Cold water! Cold water!" Criss-crossing the arena, she'd take a seat in momentarily vacated chairs, interrupting songs of praise, cackling, carrying-on in gibberish phrases, dancing in awkward clownish ways, and mocking Dédé Kouyaté, who was the griot facilitating the event. This woman and her behavior were a stark contrast to the backdrop of the stiff-lipped, heavily made-up, and watchful guests whose robust bodies were draped in colorful outfits of stiffly starched and ironed *bazin* fabric enhanced by ornate golden jewelry that glimmered in the sun.⁶⁷



Figure 14: *Wolosomuso*
Baco-Djicoroni, Bamako, Mali. December 2009.
Photo by Alexander Helsinger.

⁶⁷ I describe this celebration in greater detail in Chapter 2.

In spite of the irritating interruptions by this woman, Dédé carried-on her work singing praise songs, enlivening the crowd, and directing the numerous artists invited to animate the celebration. Puzzled, I asked Siriman, son of Dédé (and the person who invited me to this celebration) who this strange woman was, why she was behaving this way, and why the *jeliw*, especially the famous and revered Dédé Kouyaté, were letting her carry on. (At one point, the woman wrapped her arms around Siriman and called him her husband, insisting that he therefore give her money). He explained that she was *woloso* to the family hosting the event and that she therefore had the right, if not the duty, to bring unhindered comedy and disruption to the event.

The boundaries that define social position and public behavior in the Mande world create a “caste system” that is comprised of “... groups of individuals who in a concrete way can trace ancestry to a shared forebear and to a consistent single profession” (N’Diaye 1995:38, translation mine).⁶⁸ Mande societies are therefore organized into social classes (which include nobility or freeborn (Bk: *hòròn*) and servants (Bk: *jon/woloso*)) and castes (artisan trades Bk: *nyamankala*) each of which ultimately determine people’s professional, marital, and interpersonal behavior. Relationships between and among the classes and castes are ambivalent in that across social divisions people are mutually inter-dependent, while simultaneously

⁶⁸ N’Diaye (1995) and Hoffman (2000) stress the importance of distinguishing between Mande and Indian caste systems suggesting that they are similar in so far as they are both systems determined by divisions of labor, heredity, and endogamy, but that the Mande system unlike the Indian system is not based on a religious system of belief nor does it impose hierarchical distinctions based on notions of purity and pollution.

feared, scorned, and loved (N'Diaye 1995: 39; see also Hoffman 2000, and Conrad and Frank 1999). As political leaders, merchants and landed farmers, *hòròn*, offer their fellow Mande people leadership, consumer products and farmed foodstuff to the artisan castes (Bk: *nyamankalaw*) and servants (Bk: *jonw/wolosow*) to whom they are historically connected. They also wield financial, political, and dietary power over those who depend on their leadership, business acumen and agricultural offerings. As servants, *jonw/wolosow* offer the physical labor in various *hòròn* and *nyamankala* domestic, artisanal, and agricultural projects; while threatening public embarrassment of *hòròn* and *nyamankala* with comedic and unabashed lascivious behavior (as described above) that is acceptable only among *jonw/wolosow*. As bards, cultural historians, entertainers, and crafts people, *nyamankalaw* offer their patrons their genealogical, lyrical, and musical knowledge as well as their crafted wares, while brandishing the alchemical power of stirring life force (Bk: *nyama*) with their words of insight, genealogical or religious recitations, or tools fashioned from natural materials.

Whether “caste” is a concept and term applicable to Mande social organization has been a question that scholars have debated for years.⁶⁹ It was first applied in the colonial era by foreigners who drew from studies of Indian social structures in their search for an analytical label to describe Mande social organization (Hoffman

⁶⁹ See Hoffman (2000), Dilley (2000), and Tamari (1991) for detailed histories of scholarship on Mande “caste”. Hoffman (2000) and Dilley (2000) also offer in-depth analysis of scholarly debates about the applicability of Dumontian conceptions of “caste” to Mande social organization.

2000:235). In the post-colonial era, Mande studies scholars looked to what became the foundational text about caste: Louis Dumont's *Homo hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (1979).⁷⁰ In it, they found a detailed analysis of hierarchical social stratification determined by claims to power, status, and degrees of purity and impurity. Zahan (1963), Camara (1976), Tamari (1987, 1991) and N'Diaye (1995) have each in their own way offered social, cultural and linguistic evidence for the existence of hierarchy in Mande societies, upheld by endogamy, inherited occupation, and restricted behaviors based on ideas of purity and pollution.⁷¹ Although "caste" is a useful concept for thinking about how Mande social categories are defined by bounded relationships among and between different social groups and how these relationships influence and determine behavior (Hoffman 2000: 234-235), it a term that in the context of this work, is strictly in reference to *nyamankala* because this is how my informants in Bamako use it when describing Mande social organization. For them, "les hommes de caste" (which includes women) are people whose social belonging is defined according to an inherited profession, according to the roles they must play as a result of being born into that profession, and according to rules of marriage. I apply the term sparingly however, recognizing that my informants' use of it is an effort to speak to me, a

⁷⁰ Hoffman (2000: 235) rightly points out that scholars like Dumont who theorized and wrote about caste systems in the immediate post-colonial era were in effect drawing data from the colonial era. They were therefore perpetuating a top-down, hierarchical point of view on social organization, when as we will see in the contemporary Mande case, societies organize themselves in far more nuanced and relational ways. See also Appadurai (1986).

⁷¹ N'Diaye (1995), for instance, specifies the customary food restrictions and limitations on interpersonal relations that certain castes and clans must follow lest they expose themselves to physical, spiritual and social impurity.

Euro-American, French-speaking foreigner, in more familiar language. I therefore prefer to use the local Mande term, *nyamankala*, instead.

Finally, the “classical” Dumontian application of “caste” carries with it the presumption that a caste-based society is necessarily hierarchical. Mande social categories are often presented in ways that suggest a hierarchy with nobility (Bk: *hòròn*) at the social apex, artisans (Bk: *nyamankala*) in the middle, and descendants of enslaved people (Bk: *jon/woloso*) at the bottom. In the Mande world, however Mande social positions are far more nuanced and complex than any simple hierarchical description of Mande social categories suggests (see McNaughton 1988; Hale 1998; Conrad and Frank 1995; Hoffman 2000). Indeed, a person’s behavior and the power and influence they wield in a given social situation, although broadly defined by her or his ancestry, is contextually and relationally determined. The disruptive *woloso* woman in the gingham shirt would not have behaved in the manner above described had she not been at an event hosted by her her patron (Bk: *jatigi*), to whom she is bound and who is bound to her, by family history. Her heritage, ancestry, lineage (Bk: *fasiya*) overtly marks her and determines her behavior, but only when she encounters people whose ancestry (Bk: *fasiyaw*) are historically connected to hers.

Jamu ma bò jamu na.

One cannot be distinguished from one’s patronym.

While ethnicity (Bk: *siya*) and ancestry (Bk: *fasiya*) set a framework within which profession, acceptable social behavior, and marriageability are established,

patronym (Bk: *jamu*) brings a distinct historical tone to how a person enacts her or his *siya* and *fasiya*. *Jamu* is “the most important manner in which a human being is connected to the community” (Brand 2001:17) for *jamu*, infused with stories of accomplishment and shame, fortitude and cowardice, prowess and honor, mounts the knotty lode of ancestral history onto the shoulders of its bearers; determining how children of that *jamu* are expected to behave within their local community and in relation to the larger Mande world.

At the moment of her first breath, a Mande child is born into her *jamu* and thus her ancestral heritage. On the eighth day of life, her first name (Bk: *tògò*), is whispered in her ear, giving her the space to undertake her own accomplishments. Although a child’s first name is often the name given in homage to a recently deceased family member, from the grounding of the ancestral heritage encapsulated by her family name (Bk: *jamu*), and with the memory of a relative contained in her first name (Bk: *tògò*), she is given all the support that she needs to become the ideal Mande person (Bk: *Mande mògò*).⁷² Often described as “reputation,” *tògò* is a person’s achieved status, something that she establishes for herself, on her own merit, with her own creativity, and intelligence; but never should she seek the renown of her name without staying true to the filial and social obligations ascribed to her by being associated with her patronym (Bk: *jamu*). As the Mande saying goes: “*tògò bòra tògò*

⁷² See below for discussions of *mògòya* or, Mande “personhood”.

la, nka, jamu ma bò jamu na” one can be distinguished by one’s first name, but one cannot be distinguished from one’s patronym (Bailleul 2005:361).⁷³

I surmised this early on in my years of work in Mali. The day after I arrived in Bamako on my first visit in 2007, I was given my patronym (Bk: *jamu*). As a guest of a Coulibaly family, fictive kinship was quickly established. In a moment’s breadth I had become Kadija Coulibaly: named for the Prophet Mohammed’s first wife, and drawn into the line of descent from the feared and honored 18th century Bamana warrior emperor, Biton Coulibaly. At first, I thought this simply an expression of the famed “Malian hospitality” – a way of welcoming me to Mali – but as I spent more time there with people of different family names, and as my Bamanakan improved, I realized that having a patronym carries with it the expectation that one knows how to navigate the complicated matrix of Mande social relations.

I learned this lesson well in my daily outings to the market and into the city center, but never was the importance of *jamu* (and the importance of knowing about one’s own *jamu*) made so clear as when I traveled on Bamako’s storied public transport vans or SOTRAMAs, (Société Transports de Mali). Anybody who has had extended visits to Bamako has a story to tell about public transportation: the rickety, overcrowded vans, each bearing the personality of its owner, driver, money taker and tout; the challenge of squeezing your whole body into a space that can really only hold a third of you; the mothers, babies on their back, clutching their toddler’s

⁷³ See Chapter 4 for more on social status and individual achievement.

hand, hoisting their large loads off of their heads and onto the rooftop “luggage rack” while looking for a fellow passenger willing to offer a lap as a seat to one of her children; the necessity of having a sense of humor lest the heat, crowding, dust, sweat, stink, overtake you.

Entering the SOTRAMA, it is considered polite to greet one’s fellow passengers in low-toned aloofness, showing respect without bravado. In Doumanzana/Nafadji - the dusty Bamako suburb where I lodged - it was especially surprising to commuters to be greeted in Bamanakan, with that same casual reserve, by foreigners looking to share their ride. Foreigners don’t live in this part of town, let alone ride public transportation to and from it, and so, it became commonplace for fellow commuters to follow-up on my greeting by asking:

“Jamu nyuman?” “A good family name?” My response, “Coulibaly,” would set the terms of the rest of the conversation, and often the tone for the rest of the ride:

“Coulibaly?” my interrogator would ask.

“Yes, Coulibaly,” I’d respond.

“Oh, so you love to eat beans, don’t you? Is that what you have in that big bag of your? Beans? Are you heading home to prepare some beans for your husband?

Coulibaly’s are bean eaters, and we all know what happens when people eat beans!”

Laughter would tear my fellow commuters open, easing the discomforts of the crowded, hot, noisy ride into town.

In the Mande world, not only does *jamu* establish a link between an individual and her ancestors, but it also sets the terms of how members of certain *jamuw* relate to one another. Throughout Mali and its neighboring states,⁷⁴ *sununkunya* (or, *sinankunya* or *senenkunya*) is a system of joking relationships that “establishes a pattern of ritualized informal ties between members of particular patronymic clans as well as between specific castes and ethnic groups ” (Whitehouse 2012:16).⁷⁵ These ties, often expressed in playful insults, inflammatory jokes, and “trash-talking” (Whitehouse 2012:16) (like calling Coulibaly’s bean eaters), serve a central role in interpersonal relations in West Africa. As briefly noted above, *sununkunya* is identified as one of the main reasons why Mali has enjoyed years of “social stability and harmony” (Whitehouse 2012:17), and that an underlying cause of the conflict over Mali’s northern Tuareg communities seeking to secede from the Republic, is

⁷⁴ Including parts of Mauritania, Senegal, The Gambia, Guinea, Cote D’Ivoire and Burkina Faso.

⁷⁵ Sometimes also described as “*cousinage*,” or, cousin-relations. Bailleul (1996) defines it as a type of relation that includes joking or service (368). Cultural historian Sekou Camara breaks the term down into its etymological parts “*senna*,” “to master or have power over” and “*kunya*,” to have cause or reason, so clans in a *sununkunya* relationship have a historical cause or reason for which they can wield power over one another (personal communication 12/26/2009). In the Mande world, where speech is thought to be infused with *nyama* or vital life-force, verbal exchanges like the jokes of *sununkunya* play important roles in maintaining social relations and obligations. N’Diaye describes *sununkunya* as the manifestation of a “pact of alliance and mutual assistance between members of certain clans. [And that] an individual must never voluntarily cause harm to his *sununkun*, nor must he ever refuse any request or deny [his *sununkun*’s] satisfaction” (1995:18, translation mine).

the fact that the Tuareg have no such alliance.⁷⁶ Knowing your ancestry and your associated allegiances is essential to navigating daily life in Mali. And, as I learned on my daily SOTRAMA rides and market visits, fictive kinship does not exempt a person from *sununkunya*. In fact, for foreigners in West Africa, “an adopted patronym [(and knowing as much about that patronym as possible)] can be a powerful tool for facilitating social interaction” (Whitehouse 2012:18).

Mògòya ye hakili ye.
Personhood is intelligence.

To live up to the expectations set by ethnicity (Bk: *siya*), heritage (Bk: *fasiya*) and family name (Bk: *jamu*) is to achieve Mande personhood or mògòya. In Mali (as in much of West Africa), the social relations determined by one’s caste, class, ethnic group and ancestral heritage are the foundations for achieving the status of a person (Bk: *mògò*). But as Bruce Whitehouse notes, “the person is not reducible to the individual” (bridgesfrombamako.com, February 4, 2013), because an individual human being is considered a mògò only when she or he is socially engaged, behaving in a way that is commensurate with one’s social position.⁷⁷

This was made abundantly clear to me when early one morning the doorbell rang at Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts, where I was staying in 2007. Wondering who

⁷⁶ See Whewell (2013) for an excellent analysis of the how the lack of “cousin relationships” has effected Tuareg status and safety in the 2012-2013 conflict in Mali - <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21296746> (accessed June 11, 2015).

⁷⁷ Brand (2001) stresses the centrality of socially appropriate behavior noting: “People who ignore the behavioral codes are labeled *mògò tè*: “(s)he [sic.] is not a person” (18).

was at the door, I rose and peered into the courtyard only to witness my teacher and host, Seydou Coulibaly, open the door to a large man donning a long well-pressed shirt and pants both made of colorfully patterned material. The man began to sing, flailing his arms about. Seydou, ever modest and stern, looked down onto the bumpy surface of the entryway, and with a tense smile gave the man a handful of CFA, closed the door and walked back into the house. When I later asked Seydou why he gave the man money he replied: “He was a *jeli* (a griot) and I wanted him to go away.” I wondered why Seydou didn’t simply ask the man to leave, but later learned that as a Coulibaly (of noble descent – *hòròn*), Seydou has a moral and social obligation to this *jeli* (whom I later learned lived up the street and came by Seydou’s home often) and was therefore required to gift him in return for praise-songs (even if Seydou did not want his praises sung).

Seydou was born in 1960 to a noble (Bk: *hòròn*) Bamana family that moved to Bamako from the Sikasso region of Mali in the mid 1950s. Originally farmers, Seydou’s father and brothers took up work in the civil service as police officers, military personnel, and city administrators. Seydou came of age in the independence era where promise, can-do optimism, and creativity ruled people’s approach to nation building (Bk: *fasobaara*). In city schools he, like his age mates, was immersed in arts education, for at that time it was believed that music, dance, and theatre production offered valuable tools for post-colonial nation building (see Introduction). Seydou took on carpentry as a trade, building furniture as well as sets for music, dance and theatrical events. He also joined his neighborhood dance

troupe and competed in local, municipal, regional and national dance competitions. Over the years, Seydou furthered his dance career, developing his signature dance style mixing forceful “on the pulse” steps typical of Bamana men’s dances with fleet-footed stutter-steps and shuffles one sees in popular dances from Mali’s southern Wassoulou and eastern Sikasso regions. By the late 1980s and 1990s, Seydou made a name for himself throughout Bamako as a notable choreographer and dancer. His family was concerned, however, since Seydou was veering from the path on which his father and brothers were set, a path typical of urbanized nobility (Bk: *hórónw*),⁷⁸ but Seydou, ever determined and self-possessed carried on, seeking his name or reputation (Bk: *tògò*).

On the surface, Seydou’s efforts to forge his own path as an artist seem like a breaking away from tradition, but a closer look indicates how well he manages to balance his own accomplishments, his *tògò*, with the “ethico-moral” (Skinner 2009:5) obligations of his patrilineal status (noble - *hòròn*) and his Coulibaly family name (Bk: *jamu*). As a nobleman, Seydou is expected to follow the code of noble behavior defined by shame or modesty (Bk: *maloya*), and generally expressed as detached commitment, courage, large and loyal hospitality, justice, and respect for speech (N’Diaye 1995:17). Although public dance performance calls the terms of this behavioral code into question, Seydou made his career as a dancer on

⁷⁸ As Malian populations grew increasingly urbanized, customary rural trade-based distinctions of social categories were often translated into urban settings. For instance, people of *hòròn* descent often went from being aristocracy, landed gentry and warriors to engaging in political or military leadership or in civil service (N’Diaye 1995). It is no surprise, therefore, that all of Mali’s presidents since the time of independence have been of *hòròn* descent, and that Mali’s first president, Modibo Keita can trace his ancestry directly to Sunjatta Keita, founder of the 13th century Malian Empire and patriarch of the Mande world.

performance stages, not in celebration circles like weddings and baptisms (as many Malian dancers have done and today still do) where moving the body about, trying to stir a crowd to move their own bodies could be considered shameless (Bk: *malobali*). Moreover, Seydou's repertoire does not include any dances associated with the artisan castes (Bk: *nyamankalaw*) or with descendants of slaves (Bk: *jon/woloso*). I vividly recall one dance class in Cambridge, Massachusetts early on in my dance training with Seydou when I requested that he teach the Western dance community favorite, the dance of *jon/woloso* called *Jondon/Wolosodon*, to which he forcefully shook his head and replied "Non-non. I don't do that dance." It wasn't until years later that a fellow American dance protégé explained: "Seydou never teaches or dances that dance, he's *hòròn* [noble]".

Living up to the expectations set by ethnicity (Bk: *siya*), patrilineage (Bk: *fasiya*), and family name (Bk: *jamu*) is the key to achieving Mande personhood (Bk: *mògòya*) and in order to do that, a person must have knowledge and savvy. For it is said "*mògòya ye hakili ye*," personhood is intelligence, and intelligence is the expression of a person's ability to navigate between the moral obligation (Skinner 2009; Keita 2011) of upholding social standards of behavior set by ethnicity (Bk: *siya*), patrilineage (Bk: *fasiya*), and family name (Bk: *jamu*) and the individual desire to "stretch the limits of *siya* [sic.] and *jamu* [sic.]" (Cherif Keita, personal communication 3/20/13). Those who succeed in travelling this delicate terrain, are often people with the skills of having their name/ reputation (Bk: *tògò*) recognized. Seydou, in his own way, has managed this navigation quite well, playing the role of

noble (hòròn) Coulibaly, while making his own reputation as a respected dancer and choreographer. In this way, Seydou exemplifies what Skinner postulates is the essence of Mande personhood (Bk: *mògòya*):

For the Mande, *mògòya* describes “a dialectic of givenness and choice” (Jackson 1998:27) in which social mores and traditions associated with “morality” – that which is given to society as immanent and foundational [(i.e., the moral expectations set by *siya* and *jamu*)]—are in dynamic and productive tension with the “ethics” of individual agency which seeks to re-affirm, re-create, re-work, and re-construe society’s moral structures “in the light of imperatives that [include] [sic.] respect for the past as well as the changing exigencies of the present” (ibid) [sic.]. In other words, to achieve the status and identity of *mògòya* is to successfully balance rootedness and wanderlust, conservation and creativity, integrity and innovation, fidelity and fusion – not just for oneself, but for one’s Self in relation to Others. (Skinner 2009:5)

This balancing act necessary to achieving Mande personhood (Bk: *mògòya*) is highly visible in the practice and performance of Mande dance. As noted in the opening vignette Siriman Sissoko, explained that in the Mande world, we “discover people” by the dance that they do. Each ethnicity (Bk: *siya*) and patrilineage (Bk: *fasiya*) has associated dances, songs, and instruments that encapsulate the essence of that social category. Defining elements such as regional origins, and histories associated with specific family names (Bk: *jamuw*) are also revealed when ceremonial Mande dance and music is performed. Here, performance serves as a “mnemonic reserve, [that includes] patterned movements made and remembered by bodies” (Roach 1996:26) and that constitute markers of socio-cultural belonging such as ethnicity

(Bk: *siya*), patrilineage (Bk: *fasiya*), and family name (Bk: *jamu*).⁷⁹ Since the time of the founding of the Empire of Mali (13th century), weddings, baptisms, initiation ceremonies, or harvest celebrations have brought out the drums, lutes, bells, balafons (and today, the microphones, and guitars). Celebrants know the caste, ethnic group or patronym for whom a praise song is played; they recognize when a refrain or a rhythm is calling a person of that group to dance. Sissoko elaborated on this by describing how shameful it was to witness his French daughter-in-law, Manu, dance an inappropriate dance, at an inappropriate place and time.

They were at a family wedding. Manu joined the party of celebrants because she was family and because it had become a usual practice for her to join her in-laws at public events since she added a special flair to the Sissoko-Kouyaté family's work as *jeliw*. Her years of rigorous dance and music apprenticeship (with the family matriarch and decorated *jelimuso*, Dédé Kouyaté, and with the *Troupe du District de Bamako* dance ensemble) along with her uncanny ability to observe, interpret and re-enact the music and dance that she studies, has earned Manu tremendous respect as a skilled performer both in West Africa and in Europe. In fact, I have witnessed numerous occasions in Bamako when she received praise, encouragement, and gifts of money and cloth for the ways in which her dancing conjured up tearful and joyous memories of village childhood days. At this one event (described to me on separate occasions by Manu and her father-in-law, Siriman Sissoko) Manu delighted the crowd with her virtuosic transitions among classic Khassonké village-style

⁷⁹ See Taylor 2007:26.

interpretations of vernacular and griot (Bk: *jeli*) dance steps, and contemporary “balletic” Bamakois interpretations of the same material.⁸⁰ It was early on in Manu’s relationship to the Sissoko-Kouyaté family and so Manu was accustomed to the free-range performance license that being a foreigner (Bk: *toubabu*) gave her. She therefore felt nary a hesitation to offer her playful interpretation of the dance of the descendants of slaves, *Jondon/Wolosodon*, when the griot (Bk: *jelimuso*) and musicians presiding over the event sang praises in honor of the *jon/woloso* descended people present at the wedding. Little did she know or realize that by virtue of the fact that she married and was welcomed into a griot family, she was expected to take-on the responsibilities of properly representing this family and that she was committing a grave error by dancing *Jondon/Wolosodon* in the presence of her family.⁸¹

Sissoko shared this story in the context of a conversation on the Mande custom of dancing according to one’s social status. From his point of view, there was once a time when it was considered “taboo” for noble people (Bk: *hórónw*) to dance the dance of griots (Bk: *jelidon*) or for griots (Bk: *jeliw*) to perform dances specific to

⁸⁰ Khassonké or Khassongué is an ethnic group from Mali’s Kayes Region on the western border with Sénégal.

⁸¹ Barbara Hoffman (1998:92) tells a similar story about how her knowledge of the appropriateness of performance was tested during her apprenticeship with a Diabaté *jeli* family. As a Westerner, she clearly impressed Malians with her knowledge and understanding of *jeliya* (the verbal art and songs of Mande bards) such that she was encouraged to sing the praise songs she knew even if they were in celebration of the heritage and family history of her adoptive Diabaté family. Part of her training, however, was to learn when it is acceptable to perform and when it is essential to sit and watch. In the presence of her teachers and adoptive kin, Hoffman knew to decline stepping up to sing the *fasa* of her own Malian family. But had they not been present, Hoffman suggests that she would have readily sung praises to her adoptive kin.

social classes other than their own (like *Jondon*). But today, Sissoko explained, “ideas have changed, there is a mixture that effaces the social structure.”⁸² From his point of view as a musical artist and a *girot* (Bk: *jeli*) it is important to maintain customary practices and so, Manu dancing *Jondon* at a family wedding was behavior incommensurate with her status within the family (wife of a son) and with her social status within Mande society (*jeli*, ascribed to her by marriage and by virtue of the fact that she is an active performer with her *jeli* family). Sissoko reproached her for it. He explained:

I even once reproached Manu. She danced *Jondon* in front of me, in front of my parents!... “You must never dance *Jondon*. *Jondon* is reserved for slaves!” ... it isn’t a step that people appreciated too much because it is a bit naughty, a bit vulgar. But the slaves [sic.], they don’t care. They could even disrobe, totally naked and dance! They can do it. We wouldn’t reproach them for it. But if I were to do it, people would reproach me... I said to Manu, “You must never do it [(dance *jondon*)].” And she said to me, “Poupa [sic.], it isn’t nice?” I said, “No! It isn’t nice! How can you start excising [sic.] and shaking your buttocks in front of your in-laws? It’s not nice. It’s vulgar!” So since then, she never dances this. Even if she does dance it, it is never in front of us, eh!⁸³

⁸² “les idées ont changées,” “il y a de brassage,” “qui fait effacer la structure sociale”, Siriman Sissoko, Interview 1/21/2010.

⁸³ “J’ai même fait le reproche un fois à Manu. Elle a dansée le *jondon* devant moi, devant mes parents!... « Tu ne dois jamais danser le *jondon*. Le *jondon* ça c’est réservé pour les esclaves! » ... c’est un pas qui n’est pas tellement apprécié par les gens parce que c’est un peu vilain, un peu vulgaire. Alors que les esclaves, ils s’en fou. Ils peuvent même se déshabiller, tous nus danser! Eux, ils peuvent le faire, on ne leur fera pas de reproche. Mais si moi je le fais, on va me faire le reproche... J’ai dit à Manu, « il ne faut jamais le faire. » Et elle m’a dit « Poupa [sic.], ce n’est pas bon? » J’ai dit « Non, c’est pas bon! Comment tu peux commencer exciser [sic.] et remuer tes fesses devant tes beaux-parents? C’est pas bon, ça. C’est vulgaire! » Donc depuis cela, elle ne danse jamais ça. Même si elle le danse, ce n’est pas devant nous, en ! » Siriman Sissoko interview, 1/21/2010.

Interestingly, Sissoko noted that Manu's transgression was less about the fact that she danced a dance inappropriate to her ascribed social status than it was about when, where, and in front of whom she performed the dance. He knew full well that as a professional dancer and active member of the *Troupe du District de Bamako*, Manu would perform *Jondon/Wolosodon* both on stage and in public celebration (in Bamako and in Paris), but as far as he was concerned, it was imperative that she absolutely *not* do it in the presence of her in-laws. Here Sissoko demonstrates how Mande personhood (Bk: *mògòya*) is a balancing act between "conservation and creativity, integrity and innovation, fidelity and fusion" (Skinner 2009:5) for as a *jeli* and as a performing artist,⁸⁴ Sissoko is well aware of the fact that traditions change over time. It is essentially a question of whether or not those enacting changes are doing so with intelligence and knowledge (Bk: *hakíli*).

It is important to point out that bending or crossing the boundaries of appropriateness of Mande arts performance and (by extension) social performance is not only perpetrated by unknowing Western performers with fictive kinship ties to Mande families. Indeed, as we shall see, it has become quite common for aspiring and accomplished professional Malian dancers and musicians to play with the bounds of behavior determined by their ethnicity and caste (Bk: *siya*) or

⁸⁴ Siriman Sissoko, although trained as a *jeli* in customary village settings in the Keyes region of Mali, is no stranger to the realities of professional performing arts. He was a respected and recognized songwriter and musician and was a member of the *Ensemble Instrumentale du Mali* having traveled with them in the 1990s and early 2000s throughout Europe and the US. Moreover, Sissoko is familiar with the ebbs and flows of contemporary Malian music thanks to his sons, one in Mali and another in France, who are professional singer-songwriters who have enjoyed some measure of success.

partilineage (Bk: *fasiya*), in an effort to “make a name for themselves” (*ka tógó sóró*) and build their careers as professional artists.

Power Dynamics and the Dynamism of Power

Simulation and Social Position

While ethnicity (Bk: *siya*), patrilineage (Bk: *fasiya*), and patronym (Bk: *jamu*) are thought of as birthrights in the Mande world, they neither exist, nor are they perpetuated independently of the interests, desires, and imperatives of those upon whom they are bestowed. Just as artists like Siriman Sissoko bemoan the ways in which people “distort or pervert” the movements,⁸⁵ or perform material outside of the purview of their social class, others (like the numerous dancers and musicians of the *Troupe du District de Bamako*) embrace innovation, creative re-configuration, and the opportunity to play with and across socio-cultural distinctions. Indeed, in the time during which I apprenticed with the *Troupe du District de Bamako*, social position rarely seemed to play a role in determining who danced which dance, sang which song, or played which instrument in rehearsal or at the public ceremonies for which they were hired as animators.

Fired up by live audiences, *Troupe du District* members jump at any opportunity to make themselves seen and have their performance skills recognized. At domestic dance-events such as weddings or baptisms, musicians and dancers hired to animate the festivities, seek to delight celebrants and stir emotions with the flair,

⁸⁵ “*denature les pas*,” Siriman Sissoko, Interview 1/21/2010.

style and personality communicated through their performance.^{86 87} When gifts are rained down upon them by celebrants (cash mainly, but colorful yards of neatly folded fabric are often given as well) performers know that their efforts are appreciated, and hope that this approval will bring opportunities to animate future festivities.

Invited by *Troupe du District* performers, I attended countless events like these. Some of them were facilitated by griots (Bk: *jeliw*) who worked as emcees, performers, and coordinators of the performance aspects of the event. In these instances, *Troupe du District* dancers and musicians were expected to bring to the gathering an additional element of entertainment. Many of the domestic dance-events that I attended with *Troupe du District* members, however, did not include *jeliw* facilitators. On these occasions, the praise singing, oral history narration, and social commentary that *jeliw* are traditionally expected to bring into play at public celebrations were for all intents and purposes “simulated” by *Troupe du District*

⁸⁶ Drawing from Cowan’s (1990) conception of the “dance-event” as a “temporally, spatially, and conceptually ‘bounded’ sphere of interaction [where] individuals publicly present themselves in and through celebratory practices” (4), I refer to weddings and baptisms as “domestic dance-events” because they are bounded celebratory occasions that take place in the streets and alleyways in front of the event hosts’ home. The term “domestic dance-event” also speaks to the fact that weddings and baptisms are events associated with family (i.e., building or growing family), and family in the Mande world is directly tied to the home. There is an interesting etymological association as well stemming from the fact that the Bamanakan word for family is *somógó* or “house people”.

⁸⁷ This is in reference to the belief that performance in the Mande is thought to have an efficacy beyond simply entertainment. This is particularly the case in the context of *jeliya*. John William Johnson suggests that the power of *jeli* speech comes not simply from the fact that it can be “entertaining or persuasive” but that “It is a common belief that the power of the occult is conveyed in the bards’ [(*jeli* or “griot”)] words, as is demonstrated vividly by the formula many people recite when giving gifts to bards after a performance: *Ka nyama bò!* May the occult power be taken away!” (Johnson 1992:3).

members instead. Performers would take turns on the microphone, facilitating the flow and sequence of the event by calling the next song and dance, by speaking or singing the praises of hosts, and by articulating through blessings, proverbs or direct speech the reasons for which the gathering is taking place. In these moments, TROUPE DU DISTRICT members performing in a *jeli* style present what Baudrillard calls an “operational double” of *jeliya* that is “programmatically, metastable, [and] perfectly descriptive,” offering “all the signs of the real and short-circuit[ing] all its vicissitudes” (1994:2). Indeed, domestic dance-events can be costly affairs and so when *Troupe du District* members offer *jeliya* in lieu of a born, raised, and working *jeli*, they often do so in response to budgetary concerns. Nonetheless, what I found endlessly interesting at such events was the ways in which *Troupe du District* artists performing *jeliya* claimed the performance practice as their own whether or not they were born into *jeli* social class.

At a *Troupe du District* -facilitated baptism (Bk: *denkundi*) of the newborn son of a *Troupe du District* member named Baba Tounkara, troupe members performed *jeliya* in the absence of a hired and invited *jeli*. Ever a presence at rehearsals, Baba mostly sat on the sidelines, tending to the ubiquitous West African tea, circulating small cups to whomever needed a caffeine boost. With his big belly, his slow loping gait, and his deep guttural laugh, Baba rehearsed only when the troupe’s theatrical repertoire was on the agenda: when the roles of “strong-men” characters such as kings, blacksmiths, or hunters were being portrayed (Figure 15). As far as I know, Baba didn’t have a profession nor did he have work beyond the small stints the

Troupe du District could provide a performer with his limited talents. As one can well imagine, Baba's acting skills did not offer very much in the way of facilitating and animating a domestic dance-event and so his earning capacity as an artist was meager, at best. Incredibly poor, but infinitely proud, Baba could easily call upon his friends and colleagues at the *Troupe du District* to celebrate his child.



Figure 15: Baba Touunkara performing a blacksmith (*numu*) in a Troupe du District de Bamako performance of *Numudon/Numufoli*. Bamako, Mali. August 2009. Photo by the Alexander Helsinger.

I never learned whether Baba paid his colleagues directly for their work or whether he expected that the gifts spontaneously given by attendees to individual performers would be compensation enough. Nevertheless, what stood out was how well the modesty and the joy of the event seemed to coexist, especially given how at most of the domestic dance-events I attended, artists seemed to put in greater effort when they were handsomely recompensed. Baba's event took place in a small corner of a remote neighborhood that I hardly knew; it was incredibly animated in spite of the sun-drenched heat bearing down on us; and in my head remains the

striking image of the artistic director of the *Troupe du District*, Ba Issa Diallo, breaking the staid silence of his daily manner with exclamatory praises of Baba and his family, interwoven with blessed requests for Allah's grace: "*Allah ka balo!*" (May Allah help your child to survive!) "*Allah ka here d'a ma!*" (May Allah grant him peace!) (Figure 16). As the event unfolded, I found myself whipped into a frenzy by the brusque back-and-forth transitions from high intensity drumming and dancing, to the fun-loving grappling of Baba's comrades angling for their moment on the microphone to sing Baba's praises and to speechify.



**Figure 16: Ba Issa Diallo Orating at a Baptism (*Denkundi*)
Bamako, Mali. June 2009.
Photo by Alexander Helsinger.**

Theatrical Representation and Social Affinity

Domestic dance-event ceremonies such as these were not the only moments when TROUPE DU DISTRICT artists performed social positions other than those into which they were born. Public dance-events where the troupe presents (for an audience) choreographed and rehearsed pieces from their repertoire also offer interesting opportunities for artists to garner social and financial capital by performing the cultural "diacritica" (Barth 1976) of social classes other than their

own. In fact, in precisely the types of theatrical pieces in which Baba finds his calling as a man of respect – a king, a great hunter, or a blacksmith of illustrious alchemical knowledge (Figure 15) - *Troupe du District* members take-on and present iconic social roles, again, regardless of their own social positions. This is, of course, the essence of “realist” theatrical representations typically offered by West African performance ensembles like the TROUPE DU DISTRICT however, there are moments when these types of performances cease to be simply theatrical.⁸⁸

I came to this realization upon witnessing the “dance of slaves” *Jondon/Wolosodon* at a *Troupe du District* rehearsal. The lackadaisical gathering typical of the troupe’s daily rehearsals was turned on its head when my friend, renowned film actor, Issiaka (Siakaba) Kané accompanied me to rehearsal.⁸⁹ Filmmaker Souleymane Cissé “discovered” Siakaba performing with the *Troupe du District* in the mid-1980s after which Siakaba’s career as an artist was launched. Siakaba therefore has fond memories of his time at the *Troupe du District* and enjoys coming to rehearsal every now and again to visit friends and to see the *Troupe du District*’s latest offerings. In response to Siaka’s presence, Ba Issa directed the troupe to run through its most energetic choreographies. Judging from their amped-up performance, people were clearly making an effort to impress the revered actor. For the finale, Ba Issa called *Jondon/Wolosodon* because, as Ba Issa later explained, “it’s what the dancers

⁸⁸ Schechner defines “realist theatre” and “realistic acting” as that which is “based on ordinary life” (2006:176).

⁸⁹ Best known for his role as the lead in Souleymane Cissé’s 1987 award-winning film, *Yeelen*.

enjoy”.⁹⁰ Moreover, in spite of the fact that the movement repertoire of this dance centers on pelvic contractions that highlight the buttocks, its bawdiness can easily slip into playfulness and humor. This being the case, and since the *Troupe du District’s* version of *Jondon/Wolosodon* has a segment open for solo improvisation, dancers embraced the opportunity to perform it because it gave each of them a chance to shine.

The key to standing out in the *Troupe du District’s* performance of *Jondon/Wolosodon* (I learned after witnessing a number of subsequent rehearsal-come-performances at the *Troupe du District*), is to offer as evokative a solo as possible. On the day that Siakaba came to rehearsal, Fifi, the petite sprite of the group, drew cheers and high fives when her solo consisted of her on the dance floor, back to Siakaba so as to display the facility with which she could contract and release her buttock muscles. Solo drew gut-wrenching laughter when he shed his reserved demeanor and jumped into the solo circle to pantomime the all-too-familiar ills of a “running stomach”. One after another, dancers interpreted this dance of “vice” and comedy in their own way, drawing reaction big and small from all who looked on.⁹¹ It was tough, hulking, sharp-tongued Mandianin, however, who took the lewd spirit of *Jondon/Wolosodon* to its apex. She came out into the solo circle with the foundational *Jondon/Wolosodon* step: pelvis contracting while

⁹⁰ BaIssa Diallo, interview 2/17/10.

⁹¹ “Une danse de vise.” N’Chi Diakit , former director of *Les Ballets Maliens*, personal communication, June 2009.

shuffling back-and-forth on tempo. In her gaze was mischief; the music carried her along, mirroring the growing intensity of her movements. She drew within three feet of Siakaba and all of a sudden sticking her tongue out of her gaping mouth, she grabbed the collar of her sweaty t-shirt and yanked it down to her waist, bearing her breast. Siaka drew a closed fist in front of his mouth covering his laughter. *Troupe du District* dancers expressed kudos by shaking hands and hollering in side-splitting delight.

This was neither the first nor the last time I had seen the *Troupe du District* rehearsals transformed from lackadaisical gatherings to enlivened performances. Impromptu performances of *Jondon/Wolosodon* were often a part of the transformation, and each and every time it was performed, I would take note of how it roused the dancers (and the audience) in a way unlike any other dance in the troupe's repertoire [[Clip 14](#)]. What was it about *this* dance that enlivened *Troupe du District* artists in *this* way? Does the process of performing *Jondon/Wolosodon* generate a subtle affinity between *Troupe du District* artists and people of *Jon/Woloso* descent?



Clip 14: Performing *Wolosodon*
Ladji Diakité offering a *Wolosodon* solo.
***La Troupe du District de Bamako* rehearsal.**
Bamako, Mali. March 2010.
Footage and photo by the Author.
http://youtu.be/kTSPEvLD_0M

As self-proclaimed artists, *Troupe du District* members face the difficult task of proving themselves worthy of respect by developing a performance mastery on which they and their family can live and depend. As noted in the introduction to this manuscript, the transition to democracy in 1991 made this task particularly onerous because the political shift brought cuts in government-funded arts initiatives which diminished artists' avenues for creativity and expression which, in turn, undermined artists' social influence, respect and respectability.

In the Mande world, performers have long been considered socially dangerous characters for the ways in which their performance behaviors serve as sites of social commentary (where a person's foibles or moral missteps may be called into question) or as enactments of power (social power that manipulates audiences to act/react in some way, or physical or mystical power expressed through feats of

prowess and strength).⁹² These skills can ignite an audience, stirring vital force (Bk: *nyama*) in unpredictable ways. This has fed a sense of ambivalence toward artists: a desire to be entertained and moved by them, while at the same time, a distaste for the ways in which they may touch upon issues that audience members would rather ignore. In many ways, these opposing sentiments are echoed in the ambivalence people feel in the presence of *Jonw/Wolosow* at social gatherings. Like professional artists, *Jon/Woloso*-descended people are thought to have a keen ability to stir emotions and vital force (Bk: *nyama*). In public, they are expected to push the limits of humility but no one can ever really know if, when, and how it will come about. Sometimes it is expressed through clowning, mimicry, and comedy like the behavior of the afore-mentioned woman in the gingham shirt. Other times, according to a story that Siriman Sissoko once shared, it can be “an assault on modesty” enacted with provocative behavior:⁹³

One day, a young Siriman was sitting with his cousins and siblings at the gate of their home in Keyes when an old Wolosomuso, Djanna Touré, came walking by in a *pagne* that was torn in the back.⁹⁴ Upon seeing the tear, Siriman’s cousin

⁹² Arens and Karp (1989) remind us that “the concept of ‘power’ as it is used by all peoples encodes ideas about the nature of the world, social relations, and the effects of actions in and on the world and the entities that inhabit it” and that “power must be viewed in part as an artifact of the imagination and a facet of human creativity” (xii). This is to say that power is not simply about one person or group of people claiming political or material sway, influence or authority over all other people, but that power is also about “semantic creativity, including the capacity to nominate others as equal or unequal, animate or inanimate, memorable or abject, discussor or discussed” (xiv).

⁹³ “Un attentat a la pudeur,” Siriman Sissoko, interview 1/21/2010.

⁹⁴ Wrap-around skirt commonly worn by West African women. *Pagne* comes from the French meaning “loincloth,” and is also used in West Africa as a measurement of approximately 2.5 yards of cloth – about as much needed to make a typical wrap around skirt. In Mandekan, it is called a *taafe*.

commented: “Eh, Touré! Your pagne is torn, aren’t you ashamed?” And Djanna responded: “Ahhhh. Les griots! Will you give me a pagne now to replace this torn one? You say I am poor, I am wearing torn clothes, so will you clothe me now?” And she left. Some time after this encounter (once Siriman and his family had forgotten the whole affair) Djanna, completely naked, danced down the hill toward the Sissoko family home. The children ran behind her as she went. She made a commotion entering the house, and greeted Siriman’s grandfather who was in the midst of his prayers. The 94-year-old man looked up from his prayer mat and fled, closing himself in his room, demanding an explanation. Djanna, standing there naked in the Sissoko family house spoke: “You griots, you say that I am improperly dressed, that I have no clothes. So here I am, you dress me. You give me proper clothes!” And with that, the family plied her with fabric and clothing. “This will teach you to accuse me of being poorly dressed!” exclaimed Djanna. And off she went, well-clad and happy.⁹⁵

A non-local point of view could easily interpret this type of behavior outside of its socio-historical context seeing it as the performance and re-inscription of a socially-determined position of disempowerment and a reference to the ways in which enslaved people were sexually humiliated, abused, and violated by their social superiors. In fact, I have witnessed numerous instances among West African dance communities in North America where *Jondon/Wolosodon* was presented and interpreted in the context of the Middle Passage and histories of chattel and plantation slavery practiced in the Americas. It was therefore presented as a dance telling a story of people in bondage, humiliated, and shamed, who fight for their freedom and in the end celebrate the glories of their hard won self-determination.

⁹⁵ Siriman Sissoko, Interview 1/21/2010.

From a Mande perspective however, the act of publicly baring one's sexual organs is an act of taking control of a social encounter, not giving-in to others' control. Conrad points out, "in Mande belief the female genitalia, like ritual objects, contain dangerous *nyama* [(vital force)]" (1999:212) that must be respected. There are numerous historical tales of Mande women baring their bodies as weapons against a perceived threat. Motivated by the notion that the vital force (Bk: *nyama*) contained in their genitalia would neutralize the protective amulets of enemy warriors or short-circuit the schemes of power-hungry politicians.⁹⁶ So, in instances when *Jonya/Wolosoya* (*Jon-ness/Woloso-ness*) is performed, like when Mandianin dramatically bares her breast, or when a nude *Wolosomuso* approaches a respected elder griot (Bk: *jeli*) (in prayer, no less), we are not seeing displays of subservience and subjugation but rather are witnessing a performance of power that reconfigures Mande social order. Self-proclaimed artists and *Jonw/Wolosow* performing *Jonya/Wolosoya* captivate their audiences and in so doing dictate the direction of the social encounters implicated in the performance.

⁹⁶ In one telling of the Epic of Sunjata, reference is made to nine sorceresses (*sumusow*) who represent "the archetypal manifestation of female power in Mande discourse" (Conrad 1999:195) among whom Nyana Jukudulaye had the power to bring an end to fighting by "exposing her buttocks in the direction of any battle" (Conrad 1999:196). In reference to Brett-Smith (1994), Conrad notes that Mande people believe that men who "rest their eyes on a woman's sex... will quickly find their way into the grave" (212) and it thus was not simply that Nyana Jukudulaye distracted warriors by exposing her genitalia and her sexuality, but rather that the *nyama* contained in these parts of her body "conveys a deadly threat to men in battle" (212). Conrad also notes Koné's suggestion that in Bamako during the 1991 uprising, a grandmother of two grandchildren killed by soldiers allied with the Musa Traoré regime, stripped herself naked on the morning of the funeral and cursed Traoré. Traoré was overthrown later that day (213 n. 22). A more recent story is one about the wives of Malian army elites, Red Berets, who during the 2012 coup d'état, threatened to protest naked in front of the army barracks in Bamako as a means of receiving information on the whereabouts of their spouses (<http://www.slateafrique.com/91477/les-femmes-berets-rouges-menacent-de-defiler-nues-pendant-le-ramadan>, accessed 1/23/2014).

The Dynamism of Power

Once the performance is over, Mande social organization is not simply “reset” to an enduring touchstone of Mande social hierarchy with nobility (Bk: *hòròn*) at the apex and all the rest falling in line down to descendants of slaves (Bk: *jon/woloso*) at the bottom. There is, rather, an ontological “rupture” wherein a renewed set of power dynamics and social encounters come-in to play, drawing into the foreground the main actors of this new encounter. The power dynamics performed in these social interactions exemplify a *dynamism of power*: an *active* and *kinetic* reconfiguration of social influence and an upending of center-periphery or hierarchical conceptions of how societies organize themselves. The dynamism of power is active because actors’ calculations on social influence and social capital are strategic. It is kinetic because efforts toward claiming social influence and capital are physical, embodied, and characterized by movement. Indeed, mobile bodies (dancing, in this case) are at the heart of a dynamism of power.

This dynamism of power model finds kinship with Herzfeld’s (2005) *social poetics*: “the play through which people try to turn transient advantage into a permanent condition [of belonging]” (26).⁹⁷ In spite of peoples’ best efforts, however this advantage can never be permanent. Indeed, a dynamism of power echoes Foucault’s suggestion that “power is exercised, rather than possessed” (1979:16), stressing the active ways in which those implicated in a certain power dynamics (what Foucault

⁹⁷ Herzfeld exemplifies this by describing how a Rhodian man’s unexpected eccentric dance in a local coffee shop was the enactment of an “individuation that conforms” thereby resulting in his being warmly accepted into the community (2005:193-194).

would refer to as the encounter between the “dominant class” and those who are “dominated”) participate in its endless renegotiation. This is an important point to highlight in the context of Mande social organization because it is so commonly perceived and described as a static hierarchical structure given from on high. Hoffman (2000) rightly argues against this type of hierarchical conception of Mande social organization because in spite of how it may be described, power can’t ever be in the hands of the same people all the time.⁹⁸ She prefers to conceptualize Mande social organization in terms of a horizontal spatial orientation instead (2000:14) because Mande society is comprised of a “dynamic system of interdependencies... explicated in terms of asymmetrical relations” (17) among and within its various social categories (delineated above). These “asymmetrical relations” are themselves processual and dynamic; they highlight the shifting and relational ways in which people define themselves and their social belonging and the manner in which social influence is claimed.

Arens and Karp (1989) point out that in order to understand social relations and power in an African context, it is essential to recognize how people draw upon the beliefs and values of their social group to define their allegiances while using these beliefs and values to manipulate a situation to best serve their personal interests.⁹⁹ This is the essence of aforementioned Mande conceptions of personhood or, *mògòya* (the ethico-moral imperative to sustain socio-cultural tradition and community

⁹⁸ As Vico (1744) once claimed, those who trick themselves into believing that absolute power is theirs absolutely are ostensibly sowing the seeds of their own demise. Many thanks to Michael Herzfeld for refining this important point.

⁹⁹ Also see Hoffman 2000.

while achieving recognition and respect for the creative cultural innovations one has undertaken), and it is what drives the tensions between social structure and strategic kinetic and embodied practice - power dynamics and the dynamism of power - in the Mande world.

The tensions highlighted by *mògòya* - between social allegiance and self-service; sustaining cultural tradition and innovating on it - are what keep the Mande socio-cultural complex going. They resonate with what Bourdieu's conception of *habitus* (1977) as "durable systems" of socially constituted and embodied "dispositions" engaged in an endless process of (re)configuring the structures that make up the society from whence these dispositions emerge. However, while Bourdieu's *habitus* operates in the context of broad social structures such as class *mògòya* (and its role in power dynamics and the dynamism of power) is realized in the context of individual acts of social transformation within and across structures of class, caste, and ethnicity.

Using similar theoretical models, Barbara Hoffman (2000) argues that the Mande system of "social stratification" is upheld by clearly perceived distinctions between the *habitus* of different social "strata" (*jeli* and *hòròn* – griot and noble – in the context of her study). Although she recognizes cultural changes over time, she argues that distinctions between members and non-members of Mande castes are nonetheless perpetuated because everyone has a context-dependent claim to power and authority. She exemplifies this by looking at how nobility (Bk: *hòròn*) do not

have full-time claim on “social dominance” (2000:17) but rather that they can be “powered over” by *jeliw* and the claims they can make to power and authority through the verbal and musical arts of *jeliya*.¹⁰⁰ This point is well made (and well taken) however, her efforts to focus on the power of *jeliya* causes her to over-determine the definitiveness of social boundaries in the Mande world. Indeed, as the aforementioned examples of *Troupe du District* members’ “simulation” of *jeliya* and *Troupe du District* dancers’ “affinity” with *jonya/wolosoya* attest, there are numerous cases in which Mande social boundaries are far more fluid than Hoffman suggests.

Social Flexibility

Women potters are members of blacksmith (Bk: *numu*) caste within the system of Mande inherited artisanship (Bk: *nyamankala*). In the Malian town of Jenne, La Violette points out that although “endogamy is recognized as the normative pattern [for *nyamankalaw* in Jenne in particular, and in the Mande world, more broadly], it appears that women move into and out of *numu* families more often than the literature would imply”.¹⁰¹ This suggests, therefore, that there is far more “social flexibility” within Mande communities than standard descriptions of Mande social structures assert. McNaughton (1988) highlights similar trends in the Mande *numu* communities he studies: “extra-clan” liaisons are forbidden for it is said that they can diffuse the power contained in blacksmith (Bk: *numu*) tools, sap *numu* strength

¹⁰⁰ This is exemplified by the above story about Seydou (a *hòròn*) giving money to the *jeli* who came to his door early one morning.

¹⁰¹ “Moving into” implies marrying endogamously and “moving out of” implies marrying exogamously.

and spoil their work however, “all this is what people say; it is part of their culture’s ideology. In the real Mande world such liaisons do occur” (4). Such cases of “cultural intimacy” (Herzfeld 2005) - the disconnect between the socio-cultural practices that people identify as normative in their socio-cultural milieux and the practices in which they *actually* engage – are often undermined by the dynamism of power and the social flexibility that it brings about in the Mande world. There are numerous situations in which historical, social and economic factors cause people to not simply gloss over the *disconnect* between the universal truths of externally projected identity (Herzfeld 2005:5) and on-the-ground, in the moment, performances of sociality, but rather to *reconfigure* the narrative of belonging and claim to social capital as well as the behavior associated with that narrative.

As referenced in the above discussion of joking cousin relationships (Bk: *sununkunya*), patronym (Bk: *jamu*) generally serves as a strong indicator as to a person’s ethnicity (Bk: *siya*) and/or paternal heritage (Bk: *fasiya*). Based on oral history and the various epic poems recited throughout the Mande world we know, for instance, that people with the patronym Keita are descendants of the revered emperor Sunjata Keita and are therefore noble (Bk: *hòròn*), or that people with the patronym Kouyaté are griot (Bk: *jeli*) because they are descended from Balla Faséké Kouyaté, the “original” Mande *jeli*.¹⁰² Social flexibility calls this general rule into question when larger social needs are served. Chèrif Keïta points out: “In the face of

¹⁰² The Epic of Sunjata, 13th century hero and founder of the Empire of Mali, is one of the most widely known and cited epic poems recited in the Mande world. Balla Faséké Kouyaté is one of the key characters in the epic. He was court musician and bard to Sunjata Keita and is credited with creating “the original” West African jeli instrument, a xylophone known as the *bala* or *balafon*.

a mounting need to increase the number of people who could provide... specialized services [(like praise-singing or smithing)], other family names or clans were allowed in [to *nyamankala* groups]" (2011:21, n.1). Bokar N'Diaye (1995), offers examples of how financial needs and interests can enable social flexibility explaining that *hòròn* families impoverished by failures in farming or in public leadership have been known to create alliances with members of a *nyamankala* class only to eventually adopt that *nyamankala* heritage, lineage, and name as their own (16-17). *Nyamankala* trades are financially sustainable, socially beneficial, and transportable, but there are also cases in which social flexibility of this kind is engaged out of a sense of social respect.

My friend and teacher Sekou Camara once told us the story about his how his great grandfather actively changed this family's social position and heritage from noble (Bk: *hòròn*) to blacksmith (Bk: *numu*) because of a promise he made to a friend. According to Sekou, a distant great-grandfather was one day out hunting with his friend. Out in the bush, the two traded stories and secrets and made a pact that in the event that one of them dies before the other he who remains living should take and care for other's wife and family as his own. Sekou's grandfather survived his friend and, not yet married, moved to his friend's town and home, marrying his friend's wife, raising his friend's children, taking on his friend's social position as blacksmith (Bk: *numu*). Sekou never made clear whether his great-grandfather actually learned the trade of blacksmithing. What he did say, however, was that in their "original" home village Sekou's Camara family was known as noble but that

today, in the village that became his family's natal village, they are known as descendants of blacksmiths (Bk: *numu*), which is the position that Sekou claimed, occupied, and performed until his death in late 2012.

Whether social flexibility and the dynamism of power that it facilitates is enacted out of a sense of social obligation or based on economic interest, the fact of the matter is that since the early days of Malian independence it has provided important strategies of success for some of Mali's greatest cultural ambassadors, its artists. Ascribed artists who have inherited connections and obligations to music-making, singing and oration often reach beyond their griot heritage for artistic inspiration, broadening the scope of their work from ceremonies (Bk: *sumuw*) (generally presided over by *jeliw*) to include: studio recordings, music videos, live local, trans-regional and, for some, international concert tours, as well as inter-cultural performance and production collaborations. In fact, a number of cross-over stars of Mande *jeliya* including, Toumani Diabaté on the *kora* (Mande bard's harp), Basekou Kouyaté on the *jeli n'goni* (bard's lute), or Djelimady Tounkara on *jeli* guitar (among many others) are among Mali's biggest names on international "World Music" stages today.¹⁰³ Self-proclaimed artist performers whose ties to music, song, dance or theatre are based on interest and talent (as opposed to inheritance) have also capitalized on a degree of fluidity in how social belonging is interpreted, drawing

¹⁰³ Interestingly, there are few, if any, internationally recognized *jelimusow*. Lucy Duràn explains that the voices of Mande *jelimusow* have been muted because Mande and Islamic ideals of female modesty and the notion that true *jeli* mastery is tied to local issues, aesthetics, and audiences have kept *jelimuso* singing close to home (2007).

readily from the aesthetic vocabularies of performance genres grown out of and customarily performed by very specific socio-cultural groups like *jeliw* or Mande hunter's societies (Bk: *donsow*).¹⁰⁴

Salif Keita, Mali's biggest and best-known world music/pop icon, exemplifies how self-proclaimed artists can make social flexibility and the dynamism of power work in their favor.¹⁰⁵ As someone who suffers from albinism, Salif faced great challenges to his human-ness. In the Mande world (and throughout much of Africa), albinism is thought to be a mark of "invisibility"; an indication that she or he who is afflicted with the disease comes from "the frightening world of djinns and Invisible beings" (Keita 2011:30). With a musical talent and what Chèrif Keïta describes as the influence of numerous "strains of modernity" (2011:24) including exposure to a host of international musical styles from Europe, North America, the Caribbean and South Asia, Salif sought out music as a means of "demystifying albinism" (Keïta 2011:31) and freeing himself from social misconceptions. As a man of noble (Bk: *hòròn*) descent, he was "scorned and strongly condemned by his family for having become a professional musician" (Keita 2011:19), and yet, drawing from the "esthetic [sic] space" (2011:27) of *jeliya* he found a way to build a thriving career as a musician. As his talent as a performer developed, Salif learned to negotiate his artistic identity at the "intersection of his nobility or *hòrònya* and the casted and

¹⁰⁴ See Duràn (1999).

¹⁰⁵ Numerous other renowned Malian performers including Oumou Sangaré and Habib Koïte offer equally interesting examples of the role that arts performance plays in the strategic use of social flexibility and dynamic claims to social capital and belonging.

genealogically-inherited status (*jaliya*) [sic.]” (Keïta 2011:22). In fact, Salif’s efforts to build his career and his reputation were not grounded in the desire to reject Mande social structures but were, rather, grounded in an interest to reconfigure what it means to be Mande. “For him,” Chèrif Keïta writes, “nobility no longer lies in the bloodline or in the old socio-professional distinctions but rather in the conformity of one’s acts with an ideal of morality. For Salif.... the acceptance of his individual professional choice hinged on *a new understanding of nobility*... that consists in earning one’s living in an honest way by doing a job that fits one’s talents, whatever those may be” (Keïta 2011:28, italics mine).

It is important to point out that although contemporary landscapes of Mande arts performance ostensibly require both ascribed and self-proclaimed artists to, in some way, reach beyond the given bounds of their social category, the starting point from whence these efforts emerge are quite different for each type of artist. Indeed, while Mande griots (Bk: *jeliw*) ground the very fact of their engagement in arts performance in the century’s old tradition of *jeliya*, self-proclaimed artists ground their engagement in the far more recent tradition of *artistiya* (Skinner 2009).

***Artistiya* and The Ethics of Provisionality**

Skinner historicizes the distinction between *jeliya* and *artistiya* explaining: “[t]he term ‘*artistiya*’ emerged, in part , in contrast to the term ‘*jeliya*,’ denoting a ‘modern’ artistic counterpart to the ‘traditional’ aesthetic practices of *jeliw*” (2009:9). Mande *artistiya* “has its roots in the pre-independence theatre troupes, military fanfares,

popular youth associations, and dance bands of the post-World War II era of decolonization (1946-1958)” (6-7) and has grown out of the concept of the “modern artist” (*l’artiste moderne*) that developed in Mali in the post-independence era with state-sponsored professionalization of artistic practices such as acting, dancing, music-making, and visual artistry (6). *Jeliya*’s deep roots in Mande history makes it an inescapable institution in the Mande world; griots (Bk: *jeliw*) and their work as story-tellers, musicians, dancers, oral historians, genealogists, and social commentators are ever at the ready to remind a Mande child of her moral, social, and filial obligations. *Jeliw* duty to speak and the power contained in their speech moves people to act. As suggested above, this creates social ambivalence toward *jeliw* and *jeliya* because on the one hand it is thought that without them deep Mande ethical and moral history would be forgotten, while on the other hand, thanks to *jeliya*, Mande people must face the challenging obligation of honoring ethnicity (Bk: *siya*), birthright, paternal heritage (Bk: *fasiya*), and patronym (Bk: *jamu*) by walking the fine line between respecting socially acceptable (and determined) behavior and innovating on it. By contrast, self-proclaimed artists, with shallower historical roots than their *jeli* counterparts, arguably face a greater obstacle to their social acceptance. Their creativity alone can only carry them so far. Indeed, it was once explained to me that “*wari be hakili yelemake*,” “money changes people’s minds,” and so it is not until artists show a “return on the investment” of their time and effort that they can lay claim to social respectability.

Such is the case with my Malian artist friends and informants who work very hard to find creative ways to make their work sustainable and to, in turn, shore-up their social respectability in spite of having chosen a profession into which they were not born, and which is often stigmatized. Indeed, a common story shared by my artist informants is that when their families found out that they had chosen to pursue a career in dance, music, or acting, approval was withheld until they could “show them the money,” as it were. As important as music, dance, theatre and the plastic arts are and have been in Mande cultural expressions, achieving respect and recognition for these skills cannot and does not come without consideration for how these skills contribute to one’s family’s survival and reputation.

Ryan Skinner (2009) considers this very issue in the context of musicians and the popular music scene in Bamako. The musical artists who are the protagonists of his ethnographic study must negotiate and reconcile “complex ethico-moral concerns” that include “respect for heritage and tradition versus an interest in innovation and change,... commitment to family and community versus a desire for personal gain and renown” all of which “inform and shape artists' particular sense and expression of personhood (*artistiya*) in Bamako today” (2009: 10). Similar holds true for the dancers and dance-event musicians who stand at the center of this project. The choices that they make as they shape and pursue careers patch-working together all sorts of performances (from formal presentations with organized ensembles like the *Troupe du District de Bamako*, to workshops with foreign dance students, to

animating the festivities at weddings or baby naming ceremonies) are often weighed against the monetary and social “pay-off” that these performances bring.

As we have seen, the performative strategies available to dancers and dance-event musicians in Bamako such as “simulating” *jeliya*, or embracing a social “affinity” with *jonya/wolosoya*, or engaging in various degrees of “social flexibility” bring these artists face-to-face with the ethico-moral grounds on which they base the deployment of such strategies. Skinner calls this the “ethics of provisionality” wherein artists’ pursuit of meaningful livelihoods obliges them to engage with “the growing incommensurability of socio-cultural lifeworlds [(i.e., the expectations that go along with one’s inherited social position)] and socioeconomic livelihoods [to] achieve a sense of [artistic] personhood in Bamako today” (Skinner 2009:183). It is important to point out that facing the ethics of provisionality is an enduring process. In other words, navigating the rocky terrain that runs among expected social behavior, the obligation to support family, and the desire to make art and build a career as an artist is not the type of effort one makes only until “artist” status is achieved. Negotiating *artistiya* is very much a part of the ongoing dynamism of power process: a dancer is only as respectable and as respected as her last performance, and how that performance comes across depends not only on her displaying an understanding of the rhythm, movement, and socio-cultural context of that which is being performed,¹⁰⁶ but also depends on the subtle (or not so subtle as Madianin’s bold breast flashing shows) ways in which, through her dance, she

¹⁰⁶ See Chapter 2.

strategically manipulates the power dynamics of the moment with the kinetic actions of her body. Moreover, “*comme artiste je...*” (as an artist I...) or “*moi je suis artiste...*” (I am an artist) or “*nous, les artistes...*” (we, the artists) were such common tropes and pronouncements among my informants and friends in Bamako that it seems to me that by making such proclamations, they were asserting and claiming their license to, through their dance and dance-music-making, re-configure the ways in which dance and music determine and define social position. Here we return to the performativity of performance – how utterance and creative gesture construct personhood and belonging - only now we bring into the mix the practical and ethical concerns of how that which is being manifested through performance impacts and serves not only oneself but one’s family and one’s community as well. These concerns are not simply local either; they include engagements with and participation in transnational and international communities of performers and arts patrons, often putting artists in the position of having to make some hard choices about whether and how to leave home. Thus, we now turn our discussion to the ways in which transnational mobility figures-in to the coping mechanisms which Malian performing artists use to address the incommensurability of Mande socio-cultural lifeways with day-to-day socio-economic pressures.

CHAPTER FOUR

Self-Knowing Bodies **Building Social Capital and Negotiating Social Belonging through Transnational Mobility**

Situated in the northeastern sprawl of Bamako, The Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts looms above the brimming family and co-location compounds of one of Bamako's many sprawling "working class" neighborhoods. Traveling there from the city center begins as a cramped and harrowing ride along Bamako's *rive gauche* thoroughfare. Traffic gradually thins as you turn onto the cobbled streets of Korofina. Commuters unload in droves at the crossroads where the Fadjiguila market, in spite of its compact size, mounts a full assault on the senses: the sticky sweet smells of ripening mangoes and bananas mix with the iron-rich rot of butchered goat meat hanging in the sun; the trill of merchant's calls to come and peruse their plastic house wares mixes with the distorted amplifications of Bamako's latest top ten popular musical obsessions blaring from music vendors' cramped shops.

With a bone rattling thump, the cobble gives way to the potholed earthen streets, formed into hills and car-sized divots by pounding rains and the steady flow of rickety public transport vans. In the distance, thatched roof gazeboes atop an ochre stucco building come into view. The dusty air fills with a cacophonous mixture of sound: melodic laughter and argumentation mix with the din of work, only to be punctuated by the enmeshed rolling and rumbling voices of *jembes*, *dundun* drums, and singing. Transport van and taxi drivers know to drop their foreign passengers

here, for the Yeredon Center is one of the only reasons why Americans, Europeans, and Japanese tourists come out this way.



Figure 17: The Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts
Photo by Sophie Shackleton

Yeredon was established in 2007 by respected Malian dancer/choreographer Seydou Coulibaly and his American spouse performance artist, dancer, choreographer, and university lecturer Michelle Bach-Coulibaly. It is a space that proclaims to simultaneously serve local and non-local interests with a mission dedicated to “cultural preservation and assistance to local artists, education, exchange and social engagement” (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Yeredon-Center-for-the-Malian-Arts/149359695121045?sk=infor&tab=overview>, accessed 2/6/2015). As a cultural center, its rooftop decks, dance studio (complete with sprung wood floors and wall-mounted mirrors), and spacious courtyard offer Yeredon-affiliated artists a place to create, rehearse and perform. This, along with its Western-style amenities, the Yeredon center offers immersive arts education by

local artists and scholars for cultural tourists who come to Mali from North America, Europe and Japan.¹⁰⁷

The Yeredon Center serves another set of interests, as well; interests that are unarticulated, but that come into bold relief when closely examining the ways in which expressive cultures and their performers respond to and participate in global arts markets. Indeed, just as Seydou and Michelle share the laudable goals of “cultural preservation” and “bringing back” to Malian communities and artists by bringing their students to Mali to work with local artists, the fact of the matter is that the center is also an emblem of Seydou’s kinesthetic, transnational, and social mobility.¹⁰⁸



**Figure 18: Michelle Bach-Coulibaly and Seydou Coulibaly
Bamako, Mali. July 2011.
Photo by the author.**

¹⁰⁷ The Yeredon Center is a villa that has twelve bedrooms, five internal bathrooms with flush toilets and hot water showers, an enclosed living room, an extensive English and French library of books about Mande arts, performance, history and literature, an enclosed classroom/dining room, wifi connection, and small interior kitchen.

¹⁰⁸ Michelle Bach-Coulibaly, interview 08/21/2009. See Introduction for a full theorizing of my use of mobility.

This story about Seydou and the Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts is not unique. Several of Seydou's colleagues have traveled similar roads. Having honed their interests and skills in Malian expressive arts (dance, music and theatre) in the youth ensembles and festivals of the post-independence nationalist era of the 1960ies and 1970ies, these artists made names for themselves as performers, choreographers and arts leaders. With the growth of African Heritage Tours (see Ebron 1999; Bruner 1996) and World Beat consumer markets in the 1990s, professional artists found themselves performing and running dance and music workshops for increasing numbers of European and North American dance tourists. Transnational alliances were thus established and cultivated such that several foreign dance protégés and collaborators mobilized the financial, social, cultural and political capital to extend to their Malian artist friends invitations to work and, in several instances, settle abroad. Working as performance artists overseas, migrant artists' earnings quickly came to be essential sources of financial support for families and peers remaining in Bamako. Regular wire transfer remittances cover immediate needs like food, medicines, school fees, or electricity bills while inventive capital investments in Mali promise longer term self-generating sources of income. Some of these investments include shipping cars to Mali from abroad to run as taxi cabs, purchasing vans to run as public transport vehicles for the *Société des Transports du Mali* (SOTRAMA), funding small family-run market stalls, or buying herd animals for breeding, trading, or subsistence consumption. But the most highly valued and respected investments are in land. Useful for subsistence farming, for building family compounds or rental income properties, or for income-generating arts

spaces, like the Yeredon Center, buying and building on land simultaneously asserts the amassment of social and economic capital abroad that in turn facilitates a material and enduring connection to home – a connection that simultaneously asserts migrant artists’ intentions to return home to stay (whether or not they actually will).

In the discussion that follows, I use the Yeredon Center as a lens through which to explore how bilocal migrant artists (like Seydou Coulibaly) use their skills in and knowledge of Malian performance arts to participate in transnational arts markets as a means of building and enhancing their social capital at home. I call upon Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion that social capital is the aggregate of social relationships (be it kinship, friendship, or fellowship in a social or more formal institution) that can be mobilized (by material or symbolic exchange) in the name of that relationship (1986:248–249). As will become clear, the social capital that migrant artists build from a distance manifests in verbal assertions and acts of social recognition and through the interest and willingness of neighbors, peers and family members to collaborate or participate in projects with which migrant artists are associated.

Migration is no small part of this conversation. Malian migrant artists rely heavily on social and professional networks that cross national borders, traverse oceans, and blur ethnic, cultural and national distinctions as a means of gaining entry into and participating in performance arts markets outside of Mali. The transnational social networks out of which migrant artists build international careers help them

to support extended families and fellow artists in Mali and in so doing, improve their social position at home, even when they are dwelling abroad.

Malian arts centers (like the Yeredon Center) built by trans-migrant artists are the materialization of their mobility; they make tangible the ways in which an artist's creativity and kinesthetic skills serve as the means by which they can contribute to and participate in transnational arts performance markets. Access to these markets (which, as we will see, is by no means equally available to all artists) give artists the material means by which they can imagine and invest in their future and the cultural and social capital by which they can garner an enhanced sense of self and social belonging at home.¹⁰⁹

Here, I am invoking Sheller's conception of the ways in which social belonging or, citizenship, emerges from "active *inter-embodiments*" as opposed to disembodied determinations from "on high" (2012:17). At the same time, however, I am cognizant of the ways in which conceptualizing social belonging as a *citizenship from below* (Sheller 2012) might risk romanticizing the kinds of agency that individuals and communities (like the minimally educated, economically poor, and politically disempowered artists I have come to know) actually have (Abu-Lughod 1990). I therefore temper my thinking around embodied modes of negotiating social

¹⁰⁹ The focus of this discussion will be on The Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts however there are several other arts centers akin to The Yeredon Center, that are built by migrant Malian artists and that rely in large measure on money earned abroad or from grants from foreign patrons, NGOs or foreign (usually European) government initiatives. Diélimakan Sacko's *La Maison des Arts de Bamako*, Ibrahima Sarr's Medina Koro villa, and Dramane and Manu Sissoko's center still under construction are all dedicated in one way or another to the performance and transmission of Malian performance arts, and do so through creative transnational collaborations and funding.

belonging with Ong's notion of *flexible citizenship* (Ong 1999) that accounts for the ways in which larger social and political structures influence and inflect individual claims on or performances of social belonging even, or especially, for people who are transnationally mobile. In the context of this discussion of the material and social effects of the kinesthetic and transnational mobilities of Malian artists, social belonging thus speaks to the ways in which individuals articulate self-realization through the resourceful commodification, marketing, and branding of their skills as performers of Malian and Mande vernacular arts.

This chapter begins with an analysis of the political, historical, social and economic logics of migration. The narratives of three Malian migrant artists - Seydou Coulibaly, Sidi Mohammed "Joh" Camara, and Issa Coulibaly – make these logics real and in so doing, highlight the social and moral obligations that Malian artists, in particular, and Malian migrants, more broadly, face. As I intend to make clear, leaving home is not simply driven by a desire to get away from daily hardships or to find fame abroad, it is about the Mande ethico-moral imperative of *self-knowing* or, *yeredon*.¹¹⁰ But *yeredon* is not simply achieved by leaving home, it must be performed through a process of garnering knowledge of foreign lifeways and

¹¹⁰ I use "self-knowing" as the English translation for *yeredon* because it bears the closest linguistic and conceptual meaning to the Bamanakan version of the term. I am aware, however, that the English term has a "self-help" ring to it. There is a certain overlap with the psychological concept of "self-knowing" in which subjects grapple with processes of self-awareness and self-consciousness as a means of answering the question "What am I like?" However, Mande conception of this process is imbued with the tension between individuation and descent (on which I elaborate in Chapter 3). I therefore use "self-knowing" interchangeably with *yeredon* with some hesitation, but nonetheless hope that once the concept is more fully fleshed out, it will have a more nuanced significance that will be more in line with the thinking of the people at the heart of this project and for whom *yeredon* is meaningful.

languages (and their own place in them), gathering commodities and cash, and amassing social and professional connections which are then brought home through acts of return – in the form of remittances, gifts, visits and building houses. The Yeredon Center for the Malian arts was initially built by Seydou Coulibaly with the money that he earned while working abroad as a performer and arts educator. It was eventually completed (although improvements seem to be constantly in the works) and is now maintained with the money the Center generates from foreign cultural tourists lodging and studying there.¹¹¹ The Center encapsulates the complicated ways in which *yeredon* as an ethico-moral imperative becomes entangled in the strategies by which migrant artists market themselves as masterful representatives and brokers of Mande culture and of Malian arts performance (what John and Jean Comaroff might call a “brand” in this era of ethno-commerce (2009)) and by which they make tangible their mobility and their presence at home, even when they are not physically in Mali. I therefore explore *yeredon* as a place, as an ethico-moral principle, and as an “ethno-preneurial” project (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). In so doing, I nuance ongoing discussions of migration, mobility, and transnationalism. Moreover, by illuminating the “push and pull” of migration, I consider how the political, economic, historical, social, and ethical forces at play in

¹¹¹ Seydou’s intention all along was to have the Yeredon Center be a self-sustaining and profitable endeavor. And it can be, if and when tour groups come through the space on a regular basis. Seydou has been losing money ([1999](#)) since the coup d’etat in March 2012 because the political and civil unrest as well as a growing Islamist extremist presence in the northern parts of the country have placed Mali on travel ban lists for Americans and Europeans. To make matters worse, the Ebola outbreak in West Africa that reached Bamako in late 2014 (but that apparently has since subsided in Mali) poses an ongoing threat to public health that foreigners are understandably choosing to avoid. All this to say that the Yeredon Center has since 2012 been sparsely occupied by its main market of consumers and so has struggled to remain financially viable in the way it was initially intended.

driving migration are simultaneously tempered by material and social needs and by the expectations of family and peers at home.

***L'aventurier n'a pas de choix* - The Adventurer Has No Choice**

*I was curious to come to the US because there were so many Americans and Europeans came to Mali to study. I was tired. I didn't want to do dancing and drumming in Mali. People don't appreciate it. We get nothing. I was so angry. I just wanted to leave, anywhere, Burkina, Cote D'Ivoire. That was in my mind.*¹¹²

Sitting at Seydou and Michelle's dining table in Providence, RI, we talked about Seydou's training, his decision to come to the United States, and his enduring connection to Mali. The hard surfaces of their industrial loft apartment were softened by the rounded edges and earth tones of African sculptures, mud cloth tapestries, and large North African rugs. There were pillows and futon mattresses in every corner, offering sleep spaces for their two teenaged daughters and for endless streams of visitors. *Tigadigena*, Malian peanut stew, bubbled on the stove, mixing its heavy sweet-savory scent with hints of Malian incense still lingering in the air. These odors drew out memories of the bustling courtyard of Seydou's family compound in Bamako. In Mali, Seydou evaded my requests for a formal recorded interview. We had plenty of in-depth informal conversations while sitting, drinking sweet tea, with friends at the gate to the Yeredon Center. But it wasn't until we were back in the US that Seydou finally agreed to speak with me "on the record", and somehow, it seemed that the incense and bubbling stew were indispensable triggers to his nostalgic reflections and his willingness to share.

¹¹² Seydou Coulibaly, interview, May 8, 2010.

Seydou came into his own as a dancer and choreographer in the 1980s. With friends he established several dance companies that provided a number of notable *Ballet a Thème* pieces to the *Troupe du District de Bamako* for presentation at the *Biennale Artistique et Culturelle*. His charisma and his notable skills as a dancer-choreographer and as an acrobat motivated young dancers in the 1980s to explore and to innovate on the dance, music, and folktales of rural communities in and around the district of Bamako, refashioning them for the proscenium stage. By all accounts, 1980s Bamako was a time of creative efflorescence that served the still relatively fresh post-colonial nation-building agenda of *fasobaara* or “work for the fatherland”.

In 1991, a coup d'état brought an end to Moussa Traoré's 23-year socialist dictatorship, establishing Mali as a promising West African democracy. With that political promise came the promise of economic liberalization and greater access to and participation in global markets. The World Bank and IMF's Structural Adjustment Program forced the hand of Traoré's successor, Amadou Toumani Touré (ATT) to recalibrate state policies on and funding for the arts, canceling the biennial arts festivals, reducing budgets for state performance ensembles and for arts education programs. With state funding gone and the pockets of local patrons growing shallow, arts producers saw the privatization of their endeavors as their only option, and so they sought out foreign patrons and investors. Privatization of the arts was a major source of Seydou's anger and frustration. Malians struggled to

make ends meet in their new democracy, leaving them with minimal means to attend let alone sponsor arts events. And so artists like Seydou struggled to keep their work going, to maintain momentum and the willingness to collaborate and to innovate. It was around this time that he met Michelle. She had come to Mali to learn about Mande expressive culture and in 1993, a year or so after first meeting Seydou, extended an invitation to Seydou come to the United States to work with her teaching and performing Mande dance and music.

Just as the 1980s was an era that many of my artist informants consider an apex of local artistic production in Mali, the 1990s was an era of growing Malian artistic production abroad. Although Seydou was among the first professional performers of “traditional” Malian dance to establish a career as an African dancer in the United States, several of Seydou’s compatriots quickly followed suit. The circumstances of their migration are varied and potentially too incriminating to delineate here. Suffice to say that whether as tourists, as touring or visiting artists, or as Green Card spouses, Malian artists parlayed both their skills as performers and their connections to foreign arts patrons into opportunities to participate in and to expand transnational performance communities.

Sidi Mohammed “Joh” Camara (Figure 19) is one of the more successful Malian artists to have built a career as a Malian musician, dancer, and choreographer in the United States. Invited to New York City in 1995 as the choreographer of a family member’s music and dance ensemble, *Troupe Mandingue*, Joh the risk of over-

staying his visas in an effort to earn a living in the United States. Couch surfing and playing drum accompaniment for West African dance classes, Joh quickly learned the workings of the American “drum and dance scene”. When Seydou heard about Joh’s arrival in the US, he and Michelle invited Joh to drum for Seydou’s weekly community classes in Boston and Providence, and for Michelle’s Mande Dance course at Brown University. When Seydou left for his annual visit to Bamako, Joh was invited to share his skills as a dancer-choreographer by substitute teaching Seydou’s community classes. By that point, Joh had worked strictly as an accompanist percussionist, this invitation was his opportunity to make known and to further grow his skills as a dancer-choreographer. Thanks to the growing network of Malian artists and to vibrant African music and dance communities up and down the east coast of the United States, Joh was able to build a career as a free-lance performer, choreographer and instructor – a career that continues to flourish some twenty years later.



Figure 19: Sidi Mohammed "Joh" Camara
Photo credit: Sidi Mohammed "Joh" Camara

Although the circumstances of Seydou's and Joh's leaving home for work in the United States were different – Seydou by establishing a direct transnational connection to Michelle and Joh through a family member – each of them, and each of their families, recognized how opportunities to travel abroad were potentially life changing both for them and for their families. At first, though, neither artist's family appreciated the decision to focus his energies on the arts. Seydou trained as a carpenter and his family saw his afternoons away from his wood shop, working instead with his dance company, as diversions from a respectable career that allowed him to contribute to the family's daily bread. Joh trained in accounting, he was a bright student with a good head for numbers. His father detested the fact that Joh participated as an artist-animator at wedding events and as the artistic director of a local dance ensemble. He thought it beneath Joh's family's noble caste (Bk: *hórón*) and that it took him away from pursuing a promising white-collar career.¹¹³ But both Seydou's and Joh's family's attitudes changed when they found work abroad.

Leaving home for the United States was a daunting experience for Malian performance artists like Seydou and Joh and their compatriots. Family member's ambivalence and, at times, outright skepticism regarding careers in the arts, along

¹¹³ Joh describes how his father's resistance to him pursuing a career as an artist was rooted in Mande history and morality. Looking at his paternal lineage, the patrilineal heritage (*fasa*) associated with the Camara clan, Joh explains that they were the first noble family to settle in Mali. In fact, Camara has etymological roots in the verb *ka-mara* which means "let them take care of us", implying that Camara's are noblemen who should be served by others and so to play music, to entertain, to animate, to use arts performance to draw out other's social and genealogical histories is to behave in ways that are beneath Joh's ascribed social position as Camara nobility. Interview 8/23/09.

with the disillusioning, scary, and demoralizing experience of learning to live in a wholly unfamiliar (and at times unwelcoming) place was difficult to navigate. Joh told me of how when he first arrived in the United States, he was “disappointed” in how dirty and run down it seemed. He was struck and made uncomfortable by the “culture differences:” the faster and more insular pace of life, unfamiliar sexual orientations and gender roles, racism, and the lack of basic social relations among neighbors, and of course, the “hellishness” of not speaking English (see also Stoller 2013).¹¹⁴ It all made him want to get on the plane and head back home. In time, though, coming to the US came to be empowering, thanks to the material success and personal recognition that it promised. Joh, Seydou and others found that their work in the performance arts eventually helped them to find community, to build social networks, to learn (enough) English, and to ultimately build groups of protégés and befriend flush patrons who offered them recognition, respect, and compensation for the skills that brought them to the US in the first place.

The difficulties and implications of migration described by my Malian migrant artist informants are not unique to them. Scholarship on migration commonly address the myriad obstacles that migrants navigate in a new place and the pressures that they face as they work to find the means to support the families and communities that they have left behind. What is unique, however, is how a specific skill set – one that is at first denigrated and associated with less than respectable behavior – enables its stewards access to migration that ironically, in their absence, deepens their social

¹¹⁴ Joh Camara interview, 8/23/09.

presence and social position at home.¹¹⁵ Thinking about migration in this way, then, allows for a conception of the process of leaving home to build a livelihood abroad that does not necessarily imply “a ‘rupture’ in society, as the result of a social system in disarray” (Bruijn et al. 2001:2), but rather one that highlights how geographical mobility is, in fact, a social obligation for so many Africans.

Malian scholar Isaie Dougnon explains how many Malian societies conceptualize leaving home as a voyage that in and of itself is a “rite of passage” (2013:39). Migration is necessary to personal development in Mali: it is a source of learning and education, a means of gathering knowledge (in the form of skills, language, familiarity with unfamiliar systems of exchange...) and resources that will ultimately enable the migrant to build something at home that is both materially and socially valuable. The aspirations and expectations of Malian migrants are arguably inspired by the story of the revered 13th century founder of the Malian empire, Sunjata Keita. Overcoming impossible physical limitations, Sunjata had no choice but to prove his worth to his loving mother, to his cool father, to his antagonistic half brother, to his doubting community. He left home a hunter-warrior determined to find adventure from which he would grow knowledge and build alliances that he could then bring home. He returned a triumphant king of the Manden, the emperor of Mali.

¹¹⁵ Several of my interlocutors have spoken to me of the negative reputation that professional dancers and drummers have in Bamako. In fact, for many of them, their families disapproved of their choices to pursue the performance arts because dancers and drummers are often thought of as poor, uneducated, drug-addled, alcoholics who are sexually promiscuous and lost. Interestingly enough, although several of the artists whom I encountered and with whom I worked in the field were indeed illiterate, drank a fair bit, and were sexually promiscuous, far more of them were hard working, creative, and dedicated to using their skills in performance to earn a living and respect for themselves and their families.

This story is endlessly re-told and referenced in Mali. It is encapsulated in patronyms (Bk: *jamuw*), it is sung at popular music events, and it is alluded to in messages artfully painted onto the facades of public transport vans: *L'aventurier n'a pas de choix*, the adventurer has no choice (Figure 20).¹¹⁶ Bruijn et al. remind us of the fact that in some West African societies “*not* being mobile is the anomaly... sedentariness, i.e. remaining within set borders or cultural boundaries, might instead be perceived as an act of escaping from social obligations” (Bruijn et al. 2001:2; see also Grätz et al. 2010). Like Soundiatta, today’s migrants are likened to “hunters leaving for the wilderness, eager to come back with game. The hunter is always ashamed to come back empty-handed. He is aware of the recognition and social respect that he will enjoy if he comes back with spoils” (Dougnon 2013:46). Traveling enables him to do as Sunjata did and forge a new identity -- “that of an accomplished man” (ibid:46).

¹¹⁶ Keita’s are descendants of the great king, Kouyatés are their bards, Diabatés are their henchmen, Kantés are the blacksmiths who keep them in line with their vast knowledge of the occult, and so on.



Figure 20: *L'aventurier n'a pas de choix*
A SOTRAMA public transport van in Bamako, Mali.

Photo credit:

http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_Wjs0AFyJURw/R6sVA5JyfLI/AAAAAAAAAGg/CkeGfehssbw/s1600/DSCF1372.JPG

Migration is a Mande social obligation not simply because leaving home elevates a person's social position, emulating the iconic heroism of Sunjata, but also, as Seydou's story attests, because there are very real and pressing social, economic, and political concerns driving people to do so. These concerns, much like the concerns of generations of sub-Saharan migrants, reflect the circumstances of the time.

Transnationalism in Africa is not new, its contours and its manifestations shift to respond to the interests and pressures of the age (see Baker and Aina 1995; Bruijn et al. 2001; Matory 2009). In Sub-Saharan Africa, "rural-rural" migration where herders and farmers move their livestock and fields in response to seasonal weather patterns and ecological shifts (van Dijk, Foeken, and van Til 2001:10) has for centuries been an important aspect of human migration. Since colonial times,

seasonal labor migration to areas of natural resource extraction, to plantations, and eventually to factories has been a major part of people leaving home. And it goes without saying that the massive forced migration of enslaved laborers through the Middle Passage to the Caribbean and the Americas has left its own mark on the history of African (and trans-Atlantic) migration. In post-colonial times, much like in colonial days, labor migration has followed the routes to resource rich areas and urban centers (van Dijk, Foeken, and van Til 2001:10). As ecological challenges have become more pronounced, and as neoliberal economic policies of the 1990ies and beyond have consolidated economic capital and control in private interests or in the hands of larger multinational corporations (mostly based outside of Africa), increasing numbers of African people have sought routes to markets where their labor could be more lucratively compensated. Seydou and his migrant artist compatriots are a part of this most recent movement, leaving home in search of markets that would more robustly compensate them for their specialized skills in performance.

Beyond the social obligations and the economic hardships, there is a third impetus driving artists like Seydou and his compatriots to leave home: the desire and drive to find audiences that would appreciate the work about which so many of my migrant artist informants are so passionate. Joh's family saw in him a talent that would afford him the opportunity to build a career in a performance landscape that was much larger, more lucrative, and more desirable than the narrower and fiscally limited landscape in which he worked in Bamako. Likewise was the case for another

interlocutor: jembe player, Issa Coulibaly (no relation to Seydou; Figure 21), whose narrative about his own opportunity to travel to the US in the 1990s was almost entirely about the connections among migration, artistic accomplishment and social recognition.



**Figure 21: Issa Coulibaly, *Jembefola*
Bamako, Mali. August 2009.
Photo by the Alexander Helsinger.**

Invited to the United States as a *jembe* player in the Malian singer Nahawa Doumbia's band, Issa decided, upon his mother's urging, to stay in the US and find a way to help support his large and very poor family in Mali. Throughout our conversation about his migration to the US, Issa kept returning to the idea that a driving force in a person's life is the expectation that she or he "be somebody".

Recalling his family's attitude toward his playing music he explained:

That was a tough moment, because normally my family is noble, normally. I can play instruments for fun but not for profession. That's what my family didn't agree with. And me and my dad had a big fight about it. He said he was

going to chop my head off. The reason they didn't want that is not because they don't love me or that they didn't want me to be you know, somebody. But the first people who starting [sic.] drumming were doing it for fun, not for leaving [Mali]. And people who did it for leaving didn't have a better life. Didn't have happiness. That was the reason why our families give us hard time. But it was not a bad thing. They wanted us to be somebody. Be able to take care of yourself someday.¹¹⁷

From Issa's point of view, to "be somebody" is to find a respectable and pleasing way to support oneself and one's family. This echoes the teaching within the oft repeated Mandekan proverb "one can be distinguished by one's first name (Bk: *tògò*), but one cannot be distinguished from one's patronym (Bk: *jamu*)" (Baileuil 2005: 361).¹¹⁸ I address this more fully in Chapter 3, suffice here to say that to "be somebody" is to be known by name. A person's *tògò* is his achieved status, something that he establishes for himself, on his own merit, with his own creativity, and intelligence; but never should he seek the renown of his name without staying true to the filial and social obligations ascribed to him by *jamu*, his patronym.¹¹⁹ And this, of course, is why Issa claims that his father wanted to "chop his head off," for someone of noble class to make a name for himself by making music – an undertaking presumed as generally reserved for *jeliw* or bards, or for uneducated people of meager

¹¹⁷ As discussed in chapter 3, Mande societies are customarily organized into families or clans that are themselves associated with specific classes and artisan castes. As a Coulibaly, Issa comes from Bamana nobility (*hòrònya*) for whom music making and oration – the work of *jeliw* or griots – is unsuitable and for some, shameful. Issa Coulibaly interview, 8/23/09.

¹¹⁸ *Tògò bòra tògò la, nka, jamu ma bò jamu na.*

¹¹⁹ I speak of this phenomenon in the masculine because of the gendered ways in which migration of this kind manifests. I will return to this issue to flesh it out more fully in a few pages.

beginnings -- ignores his responsibility to honor the noble status of Coulibaly families.

A common thread running through Seydou's, Joh's and Issa's stories is the their families' initial resistance to their choices to pursue careers as performers that then shifted when their skills as dancers and musicians made possible the opportunity to travel. An interesting aside to this trend is how each artist's mother played an important role in reframing the sensitive fact that it was their son's performance skills that opened the door to migration. Several of Seydou's family members told me of how Seydou went to his mother for advice as to whether or not he should leave home and go to the United States – to a place where he had no one, where he didn't speak the language, where all was unknown. Apparently, his mother was a seer who “read the signs” that indicated that Seydou's departure would not be an abandonment of his family, quite the opposite, in fact. By going away, Seydou would be given great opportunities to support his family in ways that his siblings – all civil servants - simply could not do. Seydou later substantiated the accuracy of his mother's vision explaining that before he left for the United States, his brother Abdoulaye was quite reticent toward him for his choice to pursue a career in the arts, but that when he was able to prove the economic value of his work as a performer in the United States, the two of them “became friends again”.¹²⁰ In Joh's case, his mother is a griot (Bk: *jelimouso*) for whom song and dance are essential to her own livelihood and social import. It was her own brother who invited Joh along

¹²⁰ Seydou Coulibaly interview, 5/08/10.

to the United States. And finally, most powerfully in Issa's case, when I asked him if he honed his skills as a jembe player with a view to making a career abroad, he claimed that he did not but that his mother, like Seydou's mum, received a divinatory message that suggested that Issa was destined for travel and success with his music:

In the market over there, some guy has a mental illness, he told my mum: 'you have a son whose name is Issa?', My mum says 'yes', He says 'I know you're disappointed in that boy, but he's the one who is going to do everything for you, But right now, I know you have three chickens at home.'... He told my mum to go get one of them. He told my mum the color of the one he wanted. He'd never seen them. And to bring it to him. My mum did. He told my mum... whatever he's doing, let him do it. That's his destiny. He's going to be somebody some day. People are going to say his name... We had a ceremony in the street right here. There was a blind woman here. She asked somebody to take her out to see. I was playing the jembe. She says the drummer is talking to me and she told my mum what needed to be done. She said in two weeks your life is going to change. She said this to my mum. In those two weeks, I had a chance to travel and perform in Europe. For the first time, I traveled in Europe for three months. We played thirty-three concerts. With Nahawa Doumbia. Since then, I never stopped moving...¹²¹

Dougnan's insights into Malian migration once again come into view, for he suggests "the success of the migrant depends on the kindness of his mother's heart. If his mother is generous, she will see her son succeed abroad" (2013:48). This statement and its applicability to the particular case of Malian artist migration offers a valuable entrée into questions about the interplay of gender with the kinesthetic, transnational, and social mobilities under consideration in this project. It must be first pointed out, however, how Dougnan's statement articulates his situatedness:

¹²¹ Issa Coulibaly, interview 8/23/09.

his depiction of Malian male migration, told from his point of view as a Malian man living in Mali, seems to rather unselfcounsiously reinscribe the romantic portrayal of the “heroic” migrant that he is attempting to analyze. It is an instructive statement nonetheless because it encapsulates and communicates the gendered narrative of migration most commonly encountered in Mali: men bear the responsibility of supporting their families materially and they must therefore bravely leave home to claim and perform their masculinity and to find the means to fulfill their responsibilities to their families. Leaving their families, men entrust domestic concerns to their women kin (mothers, sisters and wives), whose unquestionable presence and strength are expected to stabilize the home front and keep migrant men dedicated, faithful and beholden to family (Austen et al. 1999).

This androcentric narrative is perpetuated by Mande conceptions of filial responsibilities and alliances communicated through the notions of *badenya* (mother-childness) and *fadenya* (father-childness). In polygamous families, these “axes of authority and power” (Bird and Kendall 1980; Johnson 1999) – where mothers are the stewards of authority and fathers are the stewards of power - establish expectations that children of the same mother must cooperate and support one another, while children of the same father (but of different mothers) are expected to compete with one another. I will further flesh-out these ideas later on. For now, they are useful for illuminating gendered orientations of space, place, and comportment among Mande communities.

Badenya (mother-childness), is a feminine conception of comportment that suggests that children of the same mother are bound together by obligations of collaboration and mutual support. It reflects a sense of order, groundedness and domesticity. By contrast, *fadenya* (father-childness) is a masculine conception of comportment that suggests that children of the same father must keenly compete for recognition and social power from the *pater-familias*. *Fadenya* creates a sense of chaos and conflict, that fosters the need to leave the domestic sphere to develop skills and harness knowledge that serve to articulate personhood (to “be somebody”) and that give those who leave an edge in claims on social recognition and power within the family upon their return.¹²² Looking at migration and mobility through the dichotomy of domesticity and departure, we see how leaving home plays out differently for West African men than it does for West African women. Men who leave home are fulfilling filial obligations to *support* family while women who leave home are abandoning fundamental filial responsibilities to *maintain* family.

The gendered tensions of *badenya-fadenya/feminine domesticity-masculine departure* permeate thinking around migration and mobility both in contemporary social thought as well as in sociological research in West Africa. Janet Wolff’s (1995) exploration of travel as a trope for theorizing processes of culture making, points to the ways in which travel is gendered and androcentric. Although her analysis has a Euro-centric bias, it parallels the analysis put forth by Hertrich and Lesclingand’s (2013) in Mali. Wolff illuminates how those who travel (white Western European

¹²² For more on the gendered distinctions of *badenya* and *fadenya* see Johnson 1999; McGuire 1999; Austen 1999; Charry 2000.

and white American men) are thought to be fulfilling masculine obligations to articulate self and to support family, while those who remain close to home are fulfilling feminine responsibilities to sustain family. These attitudes are echoed in Bwa positions on migration from rural areas in southeastern Mali to cities like Sikasso and Bamako. Even though there is ample evidence that labor migration has become a relatively common standard among both male and female Sub-Saharan adolescents (Hertrich and Lesclingand 2013), male migration is thought to be driven by filial obligations and serving the material needs of the family whereas women's migration is thought to be a self-interested pursuit that brings little social or material value (and perhaps even diminishes value) to the family. There are similar distinctions in the thinking around the migration of male and female professional Malian dancers and musicians at the heart of this project, even though the demographics of Malian performance artists who migrate abroad for work are quite different than the Bwa rural-urban labor migration just described.

Although women are highly visible and active dancers and singers in Malian popular performance and although women tend to make up a majority of the audiences consuming and participating in Malian popular dance and music, there are very few women among Malian artists who migrate overseas to work as small-scale performers, choreographers, or arts educators. It is important to re-iterate that leaving griots (*jeliw*) and Word Beat and Global Pop musician singers (Oumou Sangaré, Rokia Traoré, Nahawa Doumbia, Habib Koita, and the illustrious Salif Keita) out of the heart of my analysis gives me the space to focus on lesser-known Malian

artists who are arguably the “workhorses” of Mande performance. They are the people whose dance and music-making support the main acts of the *jeliw* or the renowned recording artists: dancers animate weddings or political events at which *jeliw* hold forth, they also bring a kinesthetic flair to the stage acts of touring singers; drummers accompany *jeliw* in their public performances and they bring a distinctively West African rhythmic voice (c.f. Agawu 2003) to the melodies of renowned West African recording artists. The story I am telling is about artists whose professional trajectories and skill sets are geared toward “dance and drum” audiences who wish to participate in Mande vernacular performance, rather than toward an audience that mainly wishes to experience (and consume) a presentational form of Mande performance (which tends to focus most heavily on music).¹²³ Among these types of artists, there is only one Malian woman among a community of over twenty Malian artists working as full-time performers and educators in the United States today. In France, I have encountered even fewer Malian men working as performer-educators than in the US and have only observed French women of European descent (who have had extensive dance training in Mali) teaching Malian dance. With these details in mind, questions around gender and migration are refined: why are women artists so underrepresented among Malian migrant artist populations? What are the implications for women artists who remain in Mali? And what are the aesthetic effects of Mande performance as it is circulated internationally almost exclusively by men?

¹²³ For more on the distinction between participatory and presentational performance see Turino (2008).

Although all three questions open interesting avenues of analysis, I have elsewhere in this project alluded to what might speak to the second two questions and so will focus on the first as it most directly applies to the chapter at hand. I propose three main reasons why men are in the overwhelming majority of Malian artists who migrate for work today. The first relates to the *badenya-fadenya* dichotomy and the ways in which it genders space. Women who leave home are thought to be turning their backs on family. Entering into foreign masculine space their presence as women threatens to bring social incongruity and disruption. Women who opt (or dare) to enter into masculine domains by leaving home are thought to be putting their names and their family's reputation at risk. Indeed, in Mali, as elsewhere, there are clear concerns as to the sexuality and physical safety of migrating women: will they as unmarried or unaccompanied women maintain their sexual modesty? Will they be threatened with sexual abuse and exploitation? If they leave before getting married, will they be desirable as brides and will they bring to their paternal families the kinds of bridewealth that they could bring if they hadn't left home?

The second reason why there are more male Malian artists who migrate internationally for work than female Malian artists has to do with what Sarah Brett-Smith has called "the silence of the women" (2014). Looking at the art of Bamana, Mianka, and Malikné mud-cloth (Bk: *bogolanfini*) design and production, Brett-Smith found that her efforts to elicit from women narratives about their craft, or to gain discursive insights into its practice, history, and meaning were repeatedly thwarted. Brett-Smith found that her informants "usually did not regard themselves

as having any particularly noteworthy expertise” and that although a woman might have wanted to respond to Brett-Smith’s questions, “she often had no idea how to synthesize and express her knowledge” (2014:27). Moreover, in time, Brett-Smith came to realize that even the women who recognized the value of their knowledge kept the discursive display of that knowledge to themselves because there is a deeply held concern that knowledge makes women vulnerable. Women who claim (or even perpetuate) ignorance are acting out of self-protection, for “speech as a vehicle of anything significant is a matter for men, not women” (Brett-Smith 2014:32). My own experience with Malian women dancers was astoundingly similar to what Brett-Smith found among mud-cloth craftswomen. Although my main teacher in Mali was a woman, and although I received the most guidance and input from women dancers, my requests to discuss the history, the technique, or the social import of the dances I was learning were consistently denied. Women dancers almost always deferred to men, even if the men were less skilled or arguably less knowledgeable than the women whom I had asked to speak. The “silence of the women,” therefore, brings male performers into the proverbial and literal spotlight, augmenting their visibility on stage, even as they share that stage with women. The more visible and verbal the dancer, the greater the chance he has of being recognized by dance tourists who have the cultural, material, and political capital to invite and host him overseas.

The third reason for which Malian male dancers migrate for work more commonly than female Malian dancers lies at the nexus of women’s expected domesticity (as

expressed through the concept of *badenya*), “the silence of the women,” cultural tourism, and what Joane Nagel (2003) calls *ethno-sexuality* or, the mutually defining and empowering intersections of ethnicity (which includes race and nationality) and sexuality (which includes sexual orientation and sexual preference). White foreign heterosexual women are among the majority of tourists who travel to Mali to experience and study Mande dance. Although they may mostly study with Malian women, those women’s domestic responsibilities as well as their silencing creates a scenario whereby Malian men (some dancers, but mostly drummers) are dance tourists’ main interlocutors. For instance, the Malian women who came and taught Mande dance at the Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts left soon after their teaching was done. Their domestic responsibilities – cooking, cleaning, caring for children, or for some, selling commodities at the market – called them away. The men who came to teach dance or, most often, to teach drumming, stuck around. They drank tea at the gate, joked and chatted with visitors to the Center and at times, took Center visitors on trips to city markets, to performance events, or to their homes to meet family and friends. Needless to say, countless dalliances and several longer-term love affairs have grown out of these encounters: encounters in which sexual and racial imaginings (whether consciously or not) were clearly at play.

It is no secret that there are mutual curiosities and sexual fantasies that bring together white women and black men, especially in the context of tourism and economies of ethnic and cultural commodification (Ebron 1997). George Paul Meiu (2011; forthcoming) speaks compellingly to this issue in his work on young Kenyan

Samburu men's sexual and social alliances with white Western European women who come to Kenyan coastal resorts in search of exotic encounters with African "warriors". He offers *ethno-erotic economies* as a concept that refers to the "wide networks of desire and material exchange premised on the commodification of ethno-sexuality" (Meiu forthcoming:5). In the Kenyan case, these economies enable Samburu men to negotiate and assert their social belonging without requiring them to migrate beyond Kenyan coastal resorts. In the Malian case, by contrast, ethno-erotic economies facilitate the types of transnational mobilities that Malian men are expected to achieve as they embark on the process of making a name for themselves. Their alliances with mostly white European or American women come not only with sex, cash and commodities, but also with visas, work, housing and social networks abroad. It is these offerings that serve as the grounds on which male Malian migrant artists generate the material and cultural capital (Pierre Bourdieu 1986) that they use to build their future and amass social capital at home before returning for good (Pierre Bourdieu 1986).

For migrant laborers of all sorts, including my migrant artist interlocutors, "building" takes on a literal and material meaning. By building houses in one's home country migrants are "creating a physical presence in a place from which they are absent most of the time" (Graw et al. 2012:8; see also Melly 2010; Dalakoglou 2010). Building is a performative and an aspirational act. It is performative because the ongoing, dynamic process of building a space is an articulation of a migrant's enduring success in finding work and income abroad, enhancing the migrant's social

standing at home, even though they are not physically present to perform that social standing in real time. Building is an aspirational act as well, because since migrant's houses tend to be construction projects that stretch over years and decades (depending on the remittances of migrant-owners living abroad (Melly 2010)), they are constantly working toward a vision of what they hope will be: i.e., that migrant-owners will continue to have the means to send capital home (for family needs and for their house construction projects); and that they will eventually accumulate enough capital so that they can return home in their retirement.

Issa shared his story of migration as we sat on the rooftop of his family's home in Bamako. The partially built cinderblock walls and bare iron rebar framing made visible his step-by-step process of building his personal apartment. He explained how once he allocated his earnings in the United States to his Malian family's needs he put what was left toward this place of his own within his family's compound, a place where he could stay on return visits and where he would eventually live when he returned for good. Joh had similar plans: our interview took place in the house that he built with his brother for their young families in a newer neighborhood to the south of the city center. And finally, my own accommodations throughout my several long and short-term visits to Bamako were at the Yeredon Center for Malian Arts which is Seydou's villa, built just a few blocks away from his family home.

Yeredon: The Place

For nearly a decade, Seydou and Michelle have organized and led groups of American music and dance tourists to Mali on trips that they promoted as “educational exchanges”. Over the years they went from renting lodging for their American charges and running music and dance classes taught by local artists in the yards and classrooms of local schools, to gradually building the Yeredon Center as a space where all programming – from lodging and dining to language classes and lectures; from concerts and dance parties, to dance and drum classes – could take place “under one roof”.

From 2007-2011, I spent a total of sixteen months living at the Yeredon Center. In that time, the space went through fits and starts of construction and improvements to infrastructure and décor (murals depicting historic and contemporary Malian scenes, a rooftop gazebo, mirrors on the dance studio walls, and furniture for the bedrooms). Construction projects seemed to feverishly precede the arrival of cultural tour groups, indicating an infusion of capital presumably coming from rent the groups paid to the Center. In the months I lodged at Yeredon, seven different tour groups from the US, France and Japan came through for periods of time ranging from one week to three weeks. The space was enlivened with the constant presence and flow of tourists, artists, teachers, crafts vendors, friends and shrewd hangers-on. Song, dance, and chatter were constant as “Malian cultural heritage” was being steadily brokered, re-imagined, and consumed.

John and Jean Comaroff suggest that we are in an era of swelling commodification that has drawn the politics and processes of identity formation into its tide. They offer *Ethnicity, Inc.* as a model by which to consider the ways in which “branding otherness” has become a strategic and resourceful means of participating in global markets and of generating social value (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). The Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts and the work of artists like Seydou Coulibaly and his artist compatriots further exemplify *Ethnicity, Inc.* since the success of the Center, as an institution, and Seydou et al., as individuals, rely heavily on the understanding that there exists a cohesive “brand-able” cultural entity that they represent. There is a certain slippage as to what that cultural entity is: Mande or Malian? Is it a post-colonial linguistic category used to reference an idealized pre-colonial imperial past (Mande)? Or is it a pre-colonial imperial name reclaimed by post-colonial West African leaders to rekindle regional pride and mark the rebirth of a nation (Mali)?

Seydou and Michelle use “Mande” and “Mali” somewhat interchangeably in their teaching and in their marketing of the Yeredon Center. But upon closer examination, what comes into view is not linguistic sloppiness, but rather a (probably inadvertent) allusion to the enduring influences that post-colonial nation-building, democratization, and neoliberal economic reforms have on the representation, circulation, and consumption of performance and visual arts from West Africa. Here, I am referencing the role that post-colonial governments had between 1960-1993 in establishing and canonizing a dance and music repertoire that is distinctively “Malian;” a repertoire that the government strategically referred to as a cohesive

patrimoine or, heritage even as it was drawn from a range of ethnic groups from within its post-colonial boundaries.¹²⁴ I am also making reference to the democratization and economic “adjustments” of 1993-present that privatized the arts and that, arguably inadvertently, has driven artists and their promoters to find a more “cultural,” less “political” (or politically problematic), way of referring to performance material from Mali, hence “Mande.”¹²⁵ Whatever the case may be, the fact remains that in order for The Yeredon Center and Malian migrant artists to succeed at generating income and social capital from the practice and performance of Mande expressive cultures, there has to be a branded “source” of knowledge from whence these practices and performances come.

The Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts does this branding work in interesting ways, for it is a site – a destination - where Malian artists and non-Malian cultural tourists can come together to produce, consume, and “preserve” Malian arts. Daily dance and music classes, lessons in Bamanakan language, lectures about Malian and Mande history, and performances and outings of all sorts are on offer for foreigners who

¹²⁴ See Connerton 1989 and Shay 2002.

¹²⁵ By “political” or “politically problematic” I am referring to the ways in which artists, promoters and patrons have worked to reframe concerns around the growing political problems that Mali has been facing since democratization in 1993, and more acutely since a 2012 coup d’état. Several Malian artists, in collaboration or in solo projects, produced songs and music videos in the immediate aftermath of the coup, responding to governmental corruption, civil unrest, and religious intolerance that the coup unleashed. Fatumata Diawara’s “*Mali-Ko*” collaboration, Bassekou Kouyaté and N’goni Ba’s “*Jama Ko*”, and Tiken Jah Fakoly’s “*An ka wili*” are each, in their own way, calls to Malian people to recall a harmonious past across ethnic, class, and political lines and to as such mobilize to establish a peaceful future. At a concert in Somerville, MA in November 2013, Bassekou Kouyaté spoke to the political and civil unrest in Bamako as “all done” (*terminée*), which to me sounded like an aspirational sentiment, or an effort to recast Mali in a positive light, especially in the eyes of potential cultural tourists from abroad.

come to the Center. And local intellectuals and artists are the people who instruct and perform at the center, while local staff (Seydou's son and nephews among them) maintain and service the infrastructure of the place.

In his apartment in Providence, Rhode Island Seydou explained his vision for the Yeredon center: "My thinking is to bring people from here [(the United States)] to there [(Mali)] throughout the year. It will help people there [(in Mali)] more than if artists come here [(to the US)]."¹²⁶ And Seydou should know. He and Michelle have hosted countless visiting artists from West Africa. The cost of bringing them to the United States, which includes processing visas, airfare, lodging, food, and of course honoraria, would invest more capital into the American economy and in more condensed ways than it would if cultural educational tourists were to travel to Mali. Indeed, American music and dance protégés traveling to Mali bring with them money to spend not only in payment for dance and music workshops or to cover the lodging and dining costs in Mali, but they also come with money and commodities to infuse into other facets of the local economy. The tourists who come to the Yeredon center bring cash to buy local wares including crafts, jewelery, fabric and clothing, they also come with suitcases filled with gifts. Yeredon affiliated staff, Seydou's extended family, neighbors, and a range of social action projects (including orphanages, health and environmental initiatives and schools) appreciate the medicines, school supplies, toys, electronics, clothing, and beauty products that foreign tourists are known (and in some cases, are expected) to dole out.

¹²⁶ Seydou Coulibaly, interview, 5/8/10.

Yeredon: The Ethico-Moral Imperative

Jidon, sodon, yiridon nka yèrèdon nyógón té.

One can know to swim, to ride a horse, or to climb a tree,
but there nothing is greater than knowing oneself.

Seydou and his migrant-artist compatriots maintain lively connections to Mali, even as the months or years roll on without them traveling home. “Every single month I send money to the family ever since I came to America,” Seydou explained.¹²⁷ This is a part of his filial and social obligation; the challenge of leaving home to make a name for himself is tied up in his ability to, in the process, support the family and friends he left behind. And when Seydou takes his annual visit home, he makes great efforts to show how he is “the same” even though he has established himself abroad. Seydou explained how this is the essence of the Mande ethical-moral imperative of *yeredon* or, self-knowing:

*Know where you come from, not showing people a big head, cool, respecting [sic.] everybody. The person who knows himself doesn't yell but shows people who he is. When I go home, I go to my friends my old friends, I eat what you eat. I don't go to restaurants. When I go home it's the same, as always. That's why I called my center Yeredon.*¹²⁸

As noted above, in the Mande world, personhood grows out of the tension between the expectation that a person go off and “be somebody” by finding his first name (Bk: *tógó*), while remaining aligned with and honoring his patronym (Bk: *jamu*). The ability to navigate this delicate balance is the essence of *yeredon*. And it is a skill that

¹²⁷ Seydou Coulibaly, Interview, 5/08/10.

¹²⁸ Seydou Coulibaly, Interview, 5/08/10.

is most challenging, yet highly valued among Malian migrants living far from home. Malian scholar Manthia Diawara in his memoir on Malian migration to Paris and New York City (2007) muses on the meaning of *yeredon* and the role that it plays for Malian migrants to Europe and the United States. *Yeredon* is a guiding force among Malian migrants, assuring that they remain cognizant of their African ancestry and of the daily needs of the family that they left behind. The work of self-knowing while in a foreign country, Diawara argues, insulates migrants from assimilation, for Malians abroad are ostensibly expected to build a sense of self in so far as it reflects honorably on family at home (2007:207).¹²⁹ Migrants who garner social and material capital abroad and who channel it back home are those who are doing right by their families, generating on behalf of their family name greater social respect.

Investing in land and in houses in Mali is the ultimate embodiment of this effort, not necessarily because it is an investment in an asset with growth potential, but rather because it enhances one's own and one's family's social standing and because it serves as a placeholder for future return(s). Strategies such as these make clear the notion that working overseas makes living respectably at home possible. Joh Camara, on a return visit to Mali after months working in the United States, summed it up perfectly: "Boston is where I *work*, Bamako is where I *live*"¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Diawara defines *yeredon* as "the satisfaction of knowing oneself and of being recognized for it" ("*le plaisir de se faire connaître et reconnaître*") (2003:207).

¹³⁰ Joh Camara, personal communication, August 3, 2009.

In this era of “ethno-commerce” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), *yeredon* as an ethico-moral imperative has a particular valence for Malian migrant artists that is unlike Malian migrant laborers more broadly. While self-knowing is a personal and social experience for Malian migrant laborers, it is a personal, social and professional one for Malian migrant artists. In other words, for Malian migrant dancers and musicians, seeking *yeredon* is a performance that is both social *and* artistic: a performative performance that is explored and asserted both on stage and off. Self-knowing artists are people whose performance mastery is rooted in a “cultural source” (the Mande world and/or the Malian nation) that they must clearly articulate to their consuming public (i.e., by introducing themselves as Malian performers of Mande arts, or as Malian performers of Malian arts). All the while, these same artists come to know themselves through the process of leaving home to make names for themselves *as artists* - names that come to be recognized and lauded in their home communities. Without a sense of *yeredon*, the material that Malian artists might perform, teach and sell would be a purely aesthetic and superficial representation. Self-knowing Malian migrant artists, therefore, are people who have the capacity to engage with a process “of simultaneous self-distancing and self-recognition” (McLuhan 1994:57) for they come to know themselves by leaving home to represent, in music, in dance, in discourse, the place and the culture from whence they have come and of which they claim and are presumed to have an intimate knowledge.¹³¹

¹³¹ McLuhan is cited by Comaroff and Comaroff (2009:25).

The connection of social import and space echoes Nancy Munn's (1986) analysis of the ways in which Gawan gift giving, reciprocation, and remembering gifts given and reciprocated, determines and symbolically extends an individual's social relevance across "sociocultural spacetime" (9).¹³² This is germane to the case of Malian migrant artists' process of traveling abroad to fulfill the ethico-moral imperative of *yeredon* because like the Gawans Munn studied, Malian migrant artists' social recognition is tied to the distance over which their acts (their work as artists and their remittances from that work) take place, and to the fact that such acts generate a social value that is realized or articulated over a period time (i.e., until their remittances cease) or after a time (i.e., when they return home). Recognition over distance and in one's absence is what Munn describes as fame: "a mobile, circulating dimension of the person: the travels of a person's name apart from his physical presence. In fame, it is as if the name takes on its own internal motion traveling through the minds and speech of others" (1986:105). This notion aptly describes what happens to Malian migrant artists whose departure from home is motivated by *yeredon* and the desire to make a name for themselves explicitly as artists.

Although my Malian migrant interlocutors never made specific reference to an interest in "fame" (*célébrité*, in French), I have encountered several instances in which the name of a migrant artist and the social value that it carries apart from his or her physical presence has generated a clear social response in Mali and in Mande

¹³² For Munn, spacetime is the conjunction of the mutually constituting registers of physical, social and temporal distance. From the Gawa, she has observed that successful gift-giving generates social value that connects people across geographical and social space, and collapses the distances between past, present and future.

dance communities.¹³³ The capacity of this social value to engender a response is what John Urry calls “network capital”. Speaking to the “real and potential social relations that mobilities afford,” Urry suggests “network capital is the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with those people who are not necessarily proximate and which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit” (2007:196–197). Seydou’s name and the network capital that it mobilizes has a relatively long reach. As a student of Seydou Coulibaly, as a lodger at The Yeredon Center, and as Seydou’s fictive kin (I was given the name Kadija Coulibaly – by Seydou’s family - upon my first trip to Mali in 2007), I was often introduced to artists all over Bamako as “Seydou Coulibaly’s people” (“*Seydou Coulibalykaw*”). Without Seydou reaching-out on my behalf, being known as someone somehow related to him had three main effects. The first placed me within a “genealogy of performance” from which I am presumed to have inherited a defined set of Mande dance and music knowledge and skills. Seydou is known as a dancer for whom the *petit-pas* steps of the dances of Minyanka, Senufo, and Malinké ethnic groups were an inspiration and have become signature moves in his own choreographies. He is also a dancer for whom the rhythm families (see Chapter 2) built around *Madan*, *Kôtéh*, and *Dídadí* are his strongest and most inspired representations. By association (and thanks to years of study with Seydou), the *petits pas* and these rhythm families are most familiar to me and they offer material that I am most confident performing. Secondly, as “Seydou Coulibaly’s people,” a certain social allegiance to Seydou, to his family, and to his peers is assumed and so if there is any

¹³³ There was one occasion when an artist interlocutor spoke to me of his dream of going to Hollywood to find fame with his music and dance.

jealousy, criticism, or displeasure with Seydou's perceived success, his behavior, or his style of performance, it is never (and would never be) voiced to me. Finally, as "Seydou Coulibaly's people," Seydou's compatriots and elders in the Bamako dance world were immediately ready and willing to welcome me – to speak with me, to teach me, to invite me to join in and dance.¹³⁴

Unlike the Mande migrant laborer communities that have formed and settled in the *foyers* of Parisian suburbs, the migrant artists whose stories are at the heart of this project do not recreate around themselves socio-cultural structures that are reminiscent of home (Derive 2010). In fact, the nature of their work as ambassadors of Malian expressive cultures depends, in large part, on a clientele that is explicitly not Malian. Seydou and his compatriots have shared with me how they appreciate the enthusiasm that their American protégés and audiences have for the work that they do. In the United States, Seydou explained, "people come and pay and take class. They like it! Even if you try to teach people at home [(in Mali)] for free, they don't come. Free class, they don't come. I was interested here [(in the US)] because people are happy to do things."¹³⁵ The enthusiasm that Seydou describes stems from a range of interests: from cultural "open-mindedness, "exchange," and education; from a curiosity about a cultural and racial "other"; and from notions of

¹³⁴ My association with Seydou Coulibaly was what made possible my apprenticeship to the *Troupe du District de Bamako*. Working with the Troupe, served as a centerpiece to my dance training and my understanding of the aesthetic foundations of Mande dance. For more on this relationship, see Chapters 1 & 2.

¹³⁵ Seydou Coulibaly, Interview, 5/8/2010.

Diaspora, racial solidarity, and a sense of shared African “roots”. Each of these orientations (among many others) deserves further consideration, but ultimately lie beyond the purview of this project. I make reference to it here in an effort to underscore the fact that the patrons, protégés and consumers of Malian migrant artists’ work come from a range of class, cultural, and racial backgrounds and that few of them, if any, are Malian, let alone West African.

This is an important point because Malians don’t consume and pay for Mande performance in the same way as foreigners do. They don’t take dance classes or even pay for popular Mande dance and music concerts. In Mali, the rhythms and dances that comprise much of the repertoires of migrant artists abroad are most commonly encountered at community celebrations or at popular music events where there is a porous line between performers and spectators – what Turino calls “participatory performances” wherein the “primary goal is to involve the maximum number of people in some performance role”(Turino 2008:26). This being the case, artists cannot claim the spotlight and thus cannot expect to earn much if everyone around them is making music or dancing. Artists whose specialty is popular Mande dance and music and who stay in Mali rely on the meager earnings that they garner from working as animators at weddings or baptisms (from the sums that celebration hosts offer as payments and from additional gifts from event celebrants)

and on the “luck” of connecting to foreigners interested in formal learning or formal concert presentations.¹³⁶

In 2009, Malian cultural historian and artist Sekou Camara spoke to me of the importance of *yeredon* in the context of encounters in which Malian artists are working with foreign tourists, protégés and patrons: “In this era of globalization,” Camara explained, “*yeredon* is an important concept because there are growing numbers of foreigners who have come to learn about Malian culture. Malians in such encounters have to ‘know themselves’ in order to properly represent” Mali and Malian culture.¹³⁷ Here, once again, we encounter Ethnicity Inc. and how effective transnational arts encounters depend on representing Malian culture as though it were a branded object that can be circulated in ways that generates economic and social value.

Yeredon: The Ethno-preneurial Project

The Yeredon Center for the Malian Arts, is a marketplace in which “the Malian Arts” are “preserved,” put on offer, and consumed. It is also a material enactment and

¹³⁶ A common trope used by my artist interlocutors was that of “luck” (*la chance*) and how it factored-in to making a living as an artist working with foreigners. Some spoke of the luck of connecting with foreign tourists to Mali looking for music and dance classes. Others spoke of luck in terms of opportunities to travel abroad to work as an artist. It was often explained to me that some truly talented performers never had the “luck” of receiving an invitation to travel abroad. Or that they had the “bad luck” (*la mauvaise chance*) of being discovered abroad overstaying their visas and of as such being deported. Making connections to foreigners with the means to arrange concert tours, workshops, or artists residencies in Mali, but even better in Europe, the US, or Japan is a matter of serendipitous timing – of being in the “right” place at just the “right” time.

¹³⁷ Sekou Camara, personal communication, 7/19/09.

representation of Seydou's success in achieving the ethico-moral imperative of self-knowing. Seydou's efforts to realize *yeredon*, the imperative, by building Yeredon, the place, together form an "ethno-preneurial" project (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009) that facilitates processes of negotiating social belonging. Seydou's resourceful willingness to take the financial risk of establishing an arts center dedicated to the preservation, commodification, and circulation of Malian performance puts on display and on offer, both for his Malian counterparts and for his foreign protégés and patrons, a means toward the kinds of self-realization (*yeredon*) that he himself has achieved. Indeed, the ethno-preneurial work that Seydou undertakes with the Yeredon Center and the discourse driving it (Malian "cultural preservation and assistance to local artists, education, exchange and social engagement," see above) "frames identity as a mode of finding selfhood through vernacular objects" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:28) which, in this case, includes vernacular arts performance.

As an ethno-preneurial project, Yeredon suggests that through the performance of Malian (and/or Mande) dance and music, one can "be somebody" and achieve *yeredon*. It furthermore suggests that by coming to the Center as a performer, as an artist educator, or as a student of Mande performance (Malian or foreigner) one can garner the knowledge and the capital (material, cultural, network, and social) to achieve the self-knowing and social recognition that Seydou himself has achieved. It was incredibly apt, therefore, that Seydou would respond to my recent request for

permission to write about and publicly present on the Yeredon Center and on his work building it by saying: “Yeredon is not just mine, it’s for you, too!”¹³⁸

The ethno-preneurial project is not simply a conceptual product of this post-colonial, post-modern, neo-liberal age, it is also a very real effort to engage with the challenges of the historical moment. As mentioned several times throughout this project, the 2012 Malian coup d’etat and the subsequent months of martial law forbade any forms of public gathering. As a result, vernacular performance in Bamako was silenced. Dance ensembles took extended hiatuses from their regular rehearsals and dancers and drummers had minimal work as weddings and baptisms were streamlined, celebrated in the cramped confines of compound courtyards with little, if any, song or dance.¹³⁹ The Yeredon Dance and Theatre Troupe, comprised of Yeredon Center faculty artists and their young Bamakois artist protégés, resisted this silencing and continued to rehearse at the Yeredon Center. In the early months of 2013, they joined forces with the political activist group, *SOS Democracy*, to convince young Malians of the importance of political engagement, to “get out the vote,” and to call political leaders to take responsibility for the kinds of corruption and ineptitude that has caused the Malian democracy under Amadou Tomani Touré

¹³⁸ Seydou Coulibaly, personal communication, 3/3/15.

¹³⁹ Djibril Coulibaly, personal communication, Spring 2013.

(ATT) to fail (Figure 22).¹⁴⁰ This civic engagement through the arts highlights a central aspect of how Yeredon, the ethno-preneurial project works. As an effort that regards Mande performance as a valuable means of self-knowing, Yeredon ethno-preneurialism made the Center infrastructure available to Malian artists such that they could together mobilize their performance skills in the name of enacting their citizenship and articulating their vision of a renewed and accountable democracy.



Figure 22: Troupe Yeredon at a Get Out the Vote Rally, Bamako, Mali . May 2013.
Photo from: <http://philintheblank.net/2013/05/28/why-this-can-work/>.

From *Yeredon* to *Yerekun*: Bumps In the Road to Self-Knowing and Social Belonging

Yeredon, in all of its iterations, has its limits. As much as my Malian artist interlocutors are driven by the desire to fulfill the ethico-moral and social obligation of honoring family heritage through self-knowing, many of them have lamented the fact that togetherness and cooperation, foundational aspects of Malian personhood (Bk: *Malimògòya*) and of Malian expressive cultures, have fallen by the wayside.

¹⁴⁰ Djibril Coulibaly, personal communication, Spring 2013;
<http://philintheblank.net/2013/05/28/why-this-can-work/>. For more on the Yeredon Center and the Troupe Yeredon see: <http://philintheblank.net/2013/04/17/dancing-on-the-roof-of-nafaji/>

Reflecting on his time in the United States, Seydou underscored how the music and dance that he does “is not solo work, it is creation through collaboration”. He wanted to make a dance company in the United States that called on his artist compatriots, but “we couldn’t because too much ego. We (African teachers) all have ego.” And here, Seydou introduced the inverse concept of *yeredon*, saying “*Bee kun yerekun* [(we are all self-interested)]”. People don’t see that we get more money if we work together.”¹⁴¹ Seydou’s underscoring of how self-knowing is undermined by self-interest alludes to the fact that without collaboration, migrant artists’ economic potential is not fully met and how that, in turn, diminishes their ability to support family, to invest in their homes and to thus further amplify their material and social influence in Mali.

Several of my artist-interlocutors spoke to the ways in which going abroad threatens the efforts toward *yeredon*. They would critique their peers of losing sight of where they have come from and of having an overgrown sense of individualism. There is one well-known story in the Malian dance community in the United States about the *Troupe Badenya*. In the early 2000s the ensemble drew together Malian musicians and dancers from all over New England to create a robust showcase of Mande performance. Up until that point, the Malian migrant artists living in New England collaborated a few at a time on several different projects, but this ensemble would be a more inclusive ensemble, reminiscent of the kinds of troupes in which these artists trained and performed in Mali. *Troupe Badenya*’s name comes from the

¹⁴¹ Seydou Coulibaly, Interview, 5/8/2010.

concept of *badenya* or, “mother-child-ness,” discussed above. Bird and Kendall (1980) suggest that *badenya* is associated with the “centripetal forces of society: submission, stability, cooperation, those qualities which pull the individual back to into the social mass” (15; see also Johnson 1999:16). As children of mother Mali, nourished by the life-force (Bk: *nyama*) of her expressive cultures, the migrant artists of *Troupe Badenya*, it was thought, would stand together as siblings of the same mother, and represent their home.

Badenya, also discussed above, stands in dialectical tension with *fadenya*, or “father-child-ness,” which alludes to the tenuous and at times competitive alliances among children of the same father. *Fadenya*, therefore, is associated with the “centrifugal forces of social disequilibrium; envy, jealousy, competition, self-promotion – anything tending to spin the actor out of his established social force field” (Bird and Kendall 1980:22). The story of the *Troupe Badenya* is a lesson in these two important Mande concepts for jealousy, obstinacy, and egotism caused the ensemble to fall apart not long after it was created. *Troupe Badenya*, it is said, regrettably became “*Troupe Fadenya*”.

This outcome maps in interesting ways onto larger Mande theories of social belonging and power and how they relate to thinking around migration and return. Scholarship on the epic of Sunjata and its role as a reliquary of Mande history and as a dynamic blueprint for Mande social organization, morality, and personhood point to the productive tension between *badenya* and *fadenya* (see Austen 1999). For a

person to become a full person, he must break free from the centripetal pull of home, of mother, of social connectedness, and allow the centrifuge of chaos and social isolation to take him away from that which is socially and culturally familiar. But, as I have suggested throughout this chapter, and as Bird and Kendall remind us, return is what truly distinguishes an individual: “The figures preserved in history are those who broke with the traditions of their village, severed the bonds of *badenya*, traveled to foreign lands searching for special powers and material rewards, but just as importantly, they are also the ones who returned to the villages and elevated them to higher stations” (Bird and Kendall 1980:22).¹⁴² Returning home with all that has been learned and acquired amplifies social capital and facilitates social mobility.

Speaking of these frustrations, I heard artists make reference to the well known Mandekan proverb: “*Ni bisi keme , b'i bolo, bere kelen ta. Ni hadamadenw keme b'i bolo bere keme ta.*” “All you need for one hundred cows is a single stick. But for one hundred people, you will need one hundred sticks”. Seydou invoked this saying as we talked about his coming of age as a dancer-choreographer in Mali. He explained how through his dance, he found in himself the ability to bring people together.

God gave me something. If I'm there, I can talk to people. I have a way to invite people to come and dance. God gave me the way to do this. It's not money, It's to know peoples' mind... I know all dancers' house. This is how you have to be to be chief of a dance company – you have to know everyone's house and you have to be for everybody. When you have one hundred cows, you have to take one stick, when you have one hundred humans, you have to take

¹⁴² See also McCall 2000:75; Kane and Leedy 2013.

*one hundred sticks. But I know how to direct people. You need to know how to work each person – you have to use their specific stick to direct them.*¹⁴³

But upon sharing this reflection, Seydou lamented the fact that once he left Mali, his company fell to pieces. He explained that had he known how his absence would cause his company to fall apart, he would not have left Mali. Then again, as our extensive discussion of Yeredon/*yeredon* has hopefully illustrated, by leaving, Seydou has been able to leverage his work to serve more people than had he stayed put. As we sat in the US reflecting on what Seydou saw as his missed opportunity in Mali, what remained unspoken was how, in fact, Seydou's material and social accumulation in the United States in the end helped him to build something tangible and beneficial for his community of peers, his family, and himself back home. Again, his time and work abroad brought and continues to bring recognition and respect to his name, his *tógó*, his patronym, his *jamu* and his larger community of compatriots in Mali.

This chapter's intervention highlights the complicated "push and pull" of migration. For my Malian interlocutors, leaving home is not a romanticized dream so much as it is a social and a moral obligation that is only fully realized if and when return is a clear and articulated intention. But return is not simply about physically coming back, it is also, and perhaps most importantly, about *giving* back. In making such efforts, migrant artists, capitalize on the social and economic value of "being Malian artists" by living and working abroad. In so doing, they enhance their social capital

¹⁴³ Seydou Coulibaly, interview, 5/08/10.

(and by extension their family's social capital) and their social presence at home, even when they are physically absent. Migration with the intention of coming back home is the means by which Malian dancers and drummers make a name for themselves while honoring their family heritage. In the wake of Malian democratization and attendant neoliberal economic reforms, fostering transnational social connections and building careers in transnational performance arts spaces is a way for artists to harness their skills to serve the material needs and interests of their home communities. In addition to providing for the daily needs of family and friends, my interlocutors' efforts in serving their communities are largely directed toward building homes in Mali. For artists like Joh, building a home is done in an interest of having a space where he can live with his brother and their young families when he comes home from working abroad. For artists like Issa, his home is an expansion of his family's compound. And for artists like Seydou, his home is a space for artistic, social, economic and civic exchange that serves his family, his peers, his foreign and local protégés, his neighborhood, and his nation. These built environments make material the kinesthetic, transnational and social mobilities of these artists, all the while making clear the intention of return. For in the Mande world, one who leaves home is known as an adventurer in search of himself, but one who returns home is known as Sunjata was known: a triumphantly self-realized and respected hero.

CONCLUSION

Radically Empirical Bodies

Researching Dance, Social Belonging and Transnational Migration

Experience is not the origin of our explanation... but that which we want to explain.
- Joan Scott (1991:797)

In her groundbreaking interrogation of the use of “experience” as historical “evidence,” Joan Scott articulates how experience has the potential to reproduce and reify the political and social categories that it is at first thought to undermine. Her call to interrogate experience rather than to simply accept it as the grounds of evidence was a strong undercurrent moving me along in my dance and ethnographic apprenticeship as well as in my analysis of the role that dance, dancers, and dancing bodies have in negotiating personhood and social belonging.

While Scott argues that experience is discursive in nature (1991:797) and that it must therefore be recognized as “always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted” (1991:797), I maintain that it is not *only* verbally articulated. Throughout this dissertation, I bring bodies and their various capacities for mobility into focus so as to offer for consideration another potent space for articulating what it is and what it means to belong. *Bodily experience*, therefore, is what I attempt to explain in the preceding chapters. I do so with a view toward suggesting that by recognizing how bodies are trained, how they socialize and are socialized, how they are dynamic, how they are dominated, and how they are a source of creativity and of labor, more integrated possibilities for appreciating and analyzing the body and the bodily are made available.

Mobile Bodies has grown out of fifteen years of “African dance” training in the United States and nearly two years of dance training in Mali. My time learning from and working with professional West African artists who have migrated to work in dance communities in the American northeast and in the Rocky Mountains, has taught me a lot about how to move my body, about how bodies move together, and about how processes of fashioning and moving the body in particular ways have very real social and economic outcomes. *Mobile Bodies* is an analytic framework that serves to conceptualize these outcomes. It has emerged from the bodily experiences of my Malian dance mentors and fellow dancers; experiences that were brought to my scholarly attention through the act of dancing. Dancing behind, alongside, and in front of my mentors and peers, watching them dance and feeling a real and lasting effect *in my body* has ignited in me a strong motivation to bring into scholarly conversations about human life-ways a more nuanced and more physically informed approach to thinking about human being-in-the-world.

As an analytic framework, *Mobile Bodies* is organized around a triad of mobility, each of which grows, in one way or another, out of bodies in motion. The first aspect of the triad is *kinesthetic mobility* that manifests through dancing bodies that are “formed” through distinctive pedagogies of dance practice and performance, and through the notion that to train the body is to bring into the body – to *embody* – social mores that are encapsulated in defined and recognizable aesthetics of performance. The second aspect of the triad is *social mobility* that manifests for

aspiring and professional artists who garner enhanced social respect by performing in ways that are both socially praised or that (for more creative and skilled artists) might reconfigure what it means to offer a pleasing performance. The third aspect of the triad of mobility is *transnational mobility* that manifests among artists who are skilled and who have drawn together the necessary social and network capital to secure work in transnational markets of performance and creative exchange.

The trajectory of this thesis moves distally from the body: from the kinetic, to the social, to the transnational. However, the fact that the three elements of bodily and embodied mobility are presented in a linear progression is more a function of dance writing than it is about how *Mobile Bodies* is enacted. Indeed, as I mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis and as I hope remains evident throughout the text, the triad of mobility that comprises *Mobile Bodies* is highly enmeshed – kinetic mobility resonates through social and transnational mobilities; social mobility resonates through kinetic and transnational mobilities; transnational mobility resonates through kinetic and social mobilities. In other words, just as dance skill and knowledge might enhance social capital and the possibility of travel for work, social capital might make more accessible the possibility of acquiring performance skills and access to transnational arts performance markets. And so on, in its many iterations.

In addition to offering what I hope is a useful analytic framework for scholars studying performance genres, pedagogies of practice and performance, and/or

transnational arts markets and arts marketing of all sorts, I have also put forth the notion that performance is socially impactful. Although dance, music, theatre and performance studies scholars might be well aware of the deep social import and influence that performance arts can have, social scientists often miss the performative qualities of performances *in the very moments in which they are performed*. As I have mentioned several times throughout this text, in similar ways to discursive utterances that are efficacious (saying is doing), danced assertions can be socially effectual as well (dancing is doing). Among the many moments of dancing that I describe, analyze, annotate, and explain in this text, I have proposed ways in which readers might consider how what they are reading about and watching on screen are (or have the distinct potential to be) *performative performances*.

Mobile Bodies and *performative performance* are scholarly interventions that have developed out of a series of questions raised as I worked to make sense of the landscape of Mande performance that I encountered in Bamako, Mali between 2007 and 2011. These questions, ranging from the abstract to the concrete, are oriented around bodies in motion. They include: Can we discern the social in the bodily? In what ways can dance and dancing bodies offer us insights into how sociality and sociability are *embodied*? What roles do dance and dancing bodies play in the amassment of capital (social, cultural, network, and material)? And what sorts of entrepreneurial and performance strategies do professional artists use in order to articulate a sense of personhood and social belonging?

Returning to the (albeit somewhat artificial) trajectory of this thesis, I for all intents and purposes trace the course that Malian dancers travel as they build careers as performers. In chapter one, I consider *bodily formation* by looking at the means and methods by which dancers of Mande dance learn their trade. Apprenticing professional dancers in Bamako, Mali offered me valuable insights into how dancers are trained in Mali. In much the same way that Mande people approach learning even the most mundane *techniques du corps* (Mauss 1936), Malian dancers learn by watching and doing. But bodily formation is not simply about gaining kinesthetic skill, for attached to learning dance vocabularies is learning the kinds of social nuances, affects and effects that those vocabularies can have. Chapter two delves into the aesthetic details of Mande dance vocabularies suggesting that a desirable performance - one that is deemed “sweet” (Bk: *a kadi*) – grows out of a keen social awareness and sociability among performers and between performers and their spectators. Chapter three is where I develop *performative performance* as a concept that illuminates how performance is both a space where Mande conceptions of personhood (Bk: *mògòya*) and social belonging are represented and at times renegotiated. These spaces of performative performance offer great potential for the amassment of social, economic and network capital which, for artists who are skilled, creative, and what several of my informants referred to as “lucky,” offer access to transnational markets of performance and creative exchange. Chapter four focuses on three artists whose skill, creativity and “luck” have come together to offer them opportunities to fulfill the ethico-imperative of self-realization and self-

knowing (Bk: *yeredon*). In the Mande world, self-knowing compels a person to leave home to learn something and to earn something. Bamako is filled with reminders of the importance of travel as a means toward achieving *yeredon*: exhortations that “the adventurer has no choice” (*l’aventurier n’a pas de choix*), as well as the innumerable houses in various stages of construction that permeate the urban landscape. Although conceptions of what departure means to the pursuit of *yeredon* have changed over time, it remains an important force in how today’s professional Malian artists build careers, support family, represent Mali, and garner enhanced social respectability at home by dancing and making music (most often) abroad.

As a dancer moved by her love of the dance into a space of academic inquiry about the dance, I struggled throughout this project to inoculate the kinetic power, aesthetic beauty, and affective impact of Mande dance in particular and performance arts in general, from being dis-embodied by scholarly writing. Looking back at this project, I see the places where the body remains supple and close to the work, as well as the places where my writing about the body, in effect and regrettably, writes the body out of the text. Aware of this potentiality, one of the strategies that I use throughout the thesis to “keep the body in mind” is to offer annotated video clips not simply as visual aids to the text, but also as opportunities for readers to pique their sensorium (Howes 2003) in ways that text simply cannot do. Including these film clips are my effort to remind readers that moving bodies – mobile bodies – is what this project is all about. Although the nature of the footage – its framing, its aesthetic quality, its sound quality, and so on – is clearly akin to a

“home movie,” my vision is that their roughness, rawness, and at times outright ugliness might communicate the bumpy, obstructed and distorted nature of the dance as it unfolds in Bamako streets, markets and dance studios. In so doing, my hope is that the hyperlinked film clips would invoke a physical reaction in readers that would tune them in to their bodies and thus help them to empathically imagine what the dances and dance-events might feel like in the body.

Finally, as an empirical inquiry into dance and sociality, this project would be nothing without the numerous artists whose dancing brought to the fore questions of selfhood and social belonging. Again, as much as text flattens the contours of lived experiences, one of the main aims of this project is to recognize the daily work of artists whose names may never end up on illuminated marquees, but whose performances nonetheless accomplish and teach us remarkable things about creative expression and sociality. Indeed, just as the work of people like M’ba Coulibaly, Sekou Camara, Seydou Coulibaly, Issa Coulibaly, Mohammed “Joh” Camara, Siriman Sissoko, Dédé Kouyaté, and Balssa Diallo, among so many others, (re)presents what it is to be Malian, to be Mande, to be West African in this neoliberal era. It also shines a spotlight on what it takes to carve out space in landscapes and markets of performance that are often difficult to navigate and that are frequently marginally welcoming. With grace, they dance, sing, and tell stories and to those willing to join them they show what it is to perform personhood and what it means to belong.

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